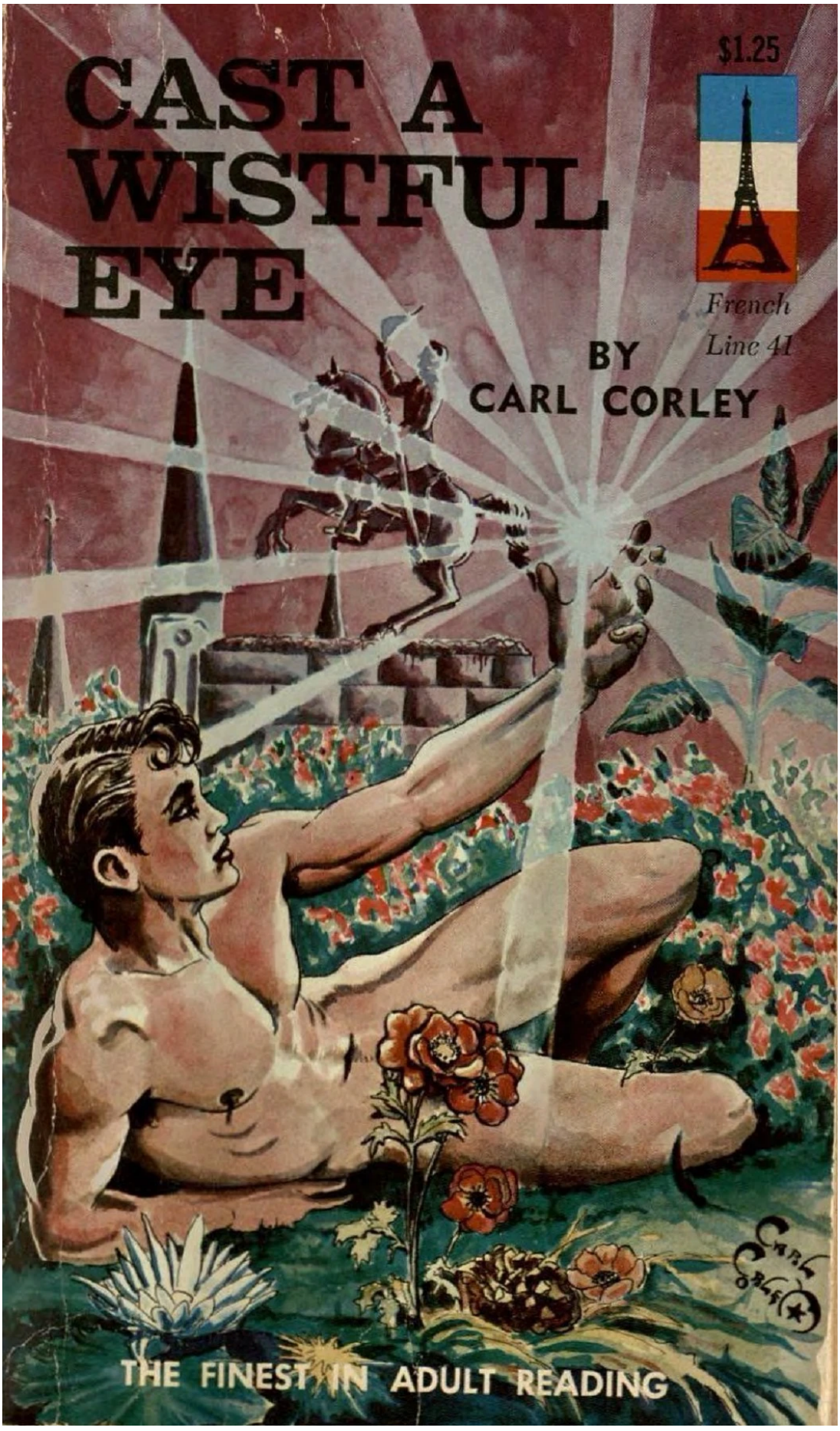
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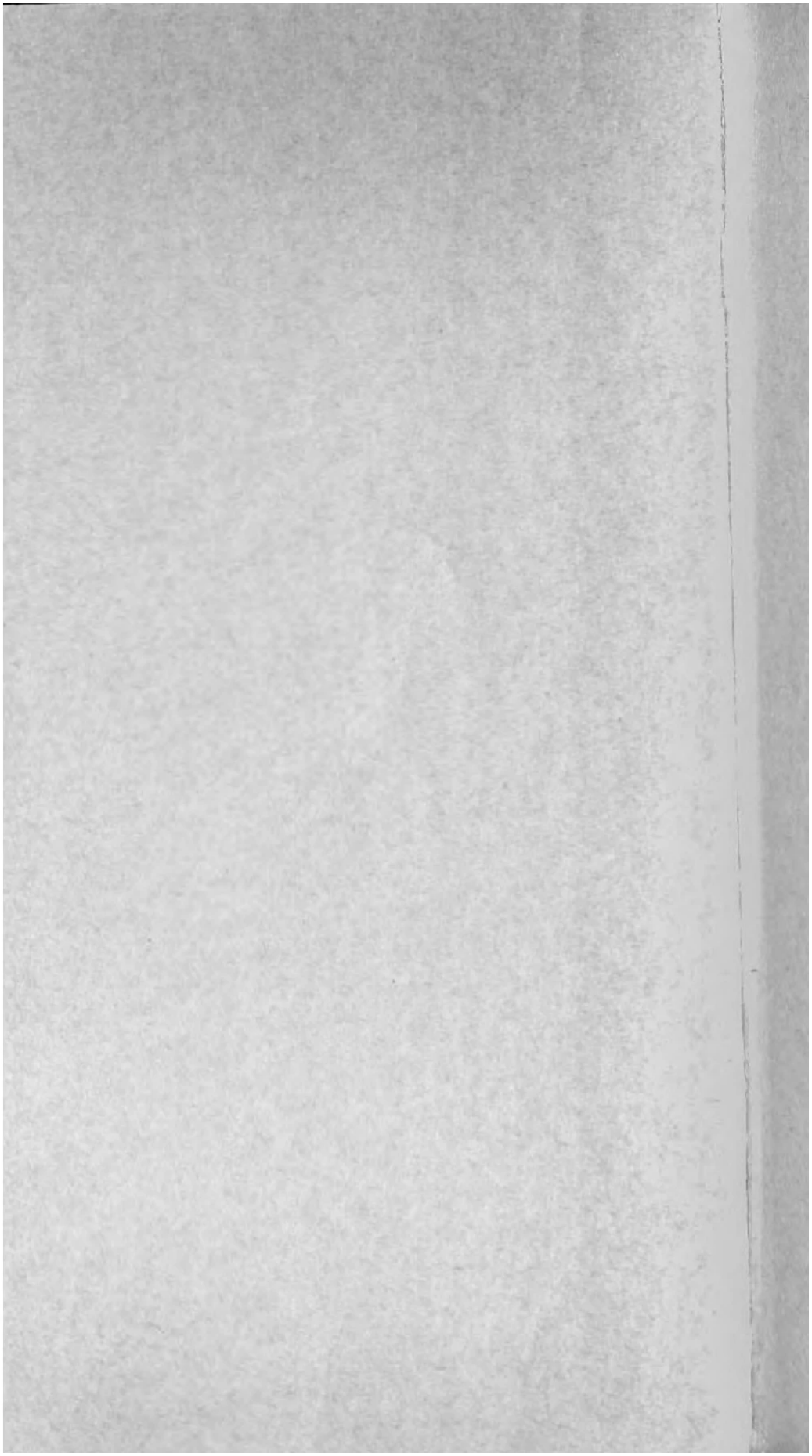

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Mel and Rusty strolled through Jackson Square at sunset, noting they were all here: the vagrants, junkies, teaheads, panhandlers, pushers, pickpockets, nymphos, shaggy Lesbians, the parading queens—male-girls—vague parodies of reality, frustrated ones who never score, older ones who prowl rather than stroll, some with invisible masks—prim, sedate—sure that no one suspects when really everyone does, clip artists with dark eyes drugged by despair and want, young stud hustlers assuming the stance that indicates experience, howking their wares— a colorful frivolity overlaid by the perverse night-world of anarchy, of misery, and of loathsome proposals from dingy queers who hunger for hard-muscled masculinity.

Man sees what he wants to see with his eyes but the only true vision comes from within the heart.

—C.C.

CAST A WISTFUL EYE

by
CARL CORLEY

Cover Design by the Author

All characters and situations in this book are fictitious.

A PEC FRENCH LINE NOVEL

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San Diego, California 92120

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Printed in the United States of America

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MARCH

Mel Marcel shifted his position on the hard wrought-iron bench in Jackson Square, stretched his muscular arms on the filigreed back rest, and squinted at the late afternoon sun in disgust.

To hell with this rotten Crescent City! This nostalgic *Vieux Carré* his literature teacher kept harping about! This city that care forgot! He wanted none of it!

His gut growled from not having eaten a solid meal in three days and nights, as he eyed the statue which centered the square. Old Andrew Jackson looked as starved as he did, a skeleton in bronze, stained with pigeon droppings, but the sleek, iron horse he rode looked well fed, and Mel envied anyone at the moment who was well fed. He envied the horse's testicles, too, for they were about the size of the cantaloupes his father raised on their little farm in Golden Meadow.

At the thought of the farm home he had so rashly abandoned, a sudden tear slid down his sun-tanned face, dropped off his chin and onto his thigh, making a dark blue circle on his faded jeans. He looked at it absently for a moment, as if wondering how it got there, and quickly tried to rub it away before someone saw it. In his homesickness and despair, he tried to fasten his thoughts on the activity in the square: the newly come flowers, the Buddha camellias, the fiery azaleas making red-hot paths in and out among the magnolias and formosa trees, the sprinkling of white dogwood, like new-fallen snow in the fresh green, mountains of bougainvillea draped over the wrought-iron fences, Spanish Bayonet in enormous black urns, the petticoat palms waving nervously in the breeze, and white, starry jasmines that looked like ice in a land that was never cold.

He had always loved flowers and all growing things, helping his mother with her flower beds bordered by stones, his father with the rich, black garden soil, turning it with a plow for spring planting. How far away that all seemed now! His hollow mind filled to the brim with memories: the little farmhouse that looked so wondrous there at twilight, the old oil lamps making golden squares through the darkness, the rich, damp smell of the place, of the turbulence of spring, of birth, of the bayous and the young moss and the creeks and lakes swarming with fish and alligator, and the dense treetops chattering with birds, and the long, flat stretches of plowed fields that went all the way to the

swamps, the dark wall of pines on the dim horizon.

"I'll never see home or Ma or Pa again," he muttered to himself, agonized, gutted with misery, torn and homesick—an alien amidst the hurly-burly of this hated city of New Orleans. Mel felt imprisoned here—though his home in Golden Meadow lay only ninety miles to the south, along highway Number One, toward Grand Isle and Timbalier Bay and the Gulf of Mexico.

It might as well have been nine million, he reflected, insofar as his going back there was concerned. No law on earth could make him marry Catina Hadalgo when he hadn't *done* anything to her. He would join the Army first, or the Marines, ask for overseas duty in Viet Nam. He wasn't the only boy in the neighborhood who had chased her a little. Maybe I *should* have touched her, he mused bitterly, as he watched two teen-aged girls priss by in bright mini-skirts, giving him a smile as they sidled past.

I'm through with girls, he vowed bitterly to himself, watching the two flirts with a half-cocked eye as they disappeared around the statue in the square. Advertising!

He spread his thick, shapely legs wide on the hard iron bench, the jeans drawing in tightly around his field-toughened muscles, and considered what he would do next in this lonely, detestable city. Nothing! What *could* he do? He did not have a penny to his name, having spent his last dime that morning for a cup of coffee at the Cafe Demonde. Gratingly, he thought of the fat old man, greasy as one of his father's pigs,

who had sat down beside him; offered him a couple of doughnuts to go along with his coffee. He had refused, and none too politely. He had never liked strangers moving in on him. "Stand-offish," was his mother's word for him. He spit on the flagstone sidewalk at the thought of the old man laying his plump, sweaty hand on top of his while they sat at a red-checked table beneath the wind-tossed tent-canvas patio.

He had never dropped his load to any man, not yet! And he certainly wouldn't drop it to that deplorable Humpty Dumpty at the Cafe Demonde!

He rubbed the spit into the dirty sidewalk with his black boot heel and wished he could have done the old man like that! He glanced at his kunckles as he flexed them lovingly. He had good hands, the skin clean and pure, smooth and tight over the bones, hands that could finish what they started, his father had said to him proudly one day when they were removing a cypress stump from one of the newly cleared fields.

Useless now! No job, no money, no hope for tomorrow!

He looked at his graduation ring, a ruby in a flame gold mounting, smiled at the good times they had shared. If only it could talk, he whispered beneath his breath, it would sure have a story to tell.

But would it? He considered his experiences of twenty-four years, and asked himself with feelings of guilt what he had accomplished to commend him? Little if anything. He had managed twelve years for school; he had gone out for

track, had learned to swim like a fish, to shoot more accurately than any boy in the parish, to ride a horse like a phantom, and to work from dawn till dusk in the fields, but there was little else. Country life in the marshes around the Gulf afforded few excitements, with the exception of annual festivals, and he had grown up quiet, reserved, with bountiful heat and energy locked away somewhere in his sinewy body, locked and guarded until that time he thought ready to open the door to his many hungers and set them free.

Catina Hadalgo had spurred him to open it to cross highway 308, down Lafourche Moreau, over Lake Jesse in his father's dug-out pirogue but it had taken almost all his money to fly to New Orleans, a place where he had promised himself that he would go all out and free that wild, flaming energy which strained inside him.

But now he sat alone, hungry, despairing, weary of the friendless streets, the constant noise, the aloofness of the tourists, the smells of mold from last year's fallen leaves, weary of the dankness of the river. Mel was acutely aware of his physical wants: a bath for his filthy skin, a soft place to sleep tonight, food, quiet like the hushed stillness of the farm, peace—above all else peace.

But he had none of these desperately desired things; the sun was dropping behind the statue of Andrew Jackson in a wild flambeau of many colors, hundreds of pigeons were winging homeward to be fed by the nuns, conspicious among the bums and stragglers and sex hungry degenerates who were obeying the call to come out into

the streets to prowl, seeking a cure for whatever ailed them. People in great black swarms, returning from work, were making shortcuts through the square, carhorns honked, delivery trucks rambled down Decatur, vibrating the whole park, and the employees of the huge Jax Brewery were beginning to file out of the wide-flung doors like prisoners freed from captivity.

On the river the hollow sounding whistles of ships, ferrys and tugboats called—lonely, melancholy—like sirens lamenting a lost love. The clock on the spire of the cathedral struck five.

Another night to bundle up in a wad on the hard iron benches and fight predatory insects and cold!

Home! What a lonesome sounding word!

What peace! Papa would be milking about now, he reflected longingly, pulling at the long pink udders while he drew clouds of smoke from his pipe which was filled with perique, the blackest, most peculiarly flavored tobacco in the world, raised right on the farm. Ma would be in the back kitchen, her dark hair molten gold under the oil lamps, turning out hot biscuits, baked yams from last season, pommes soufflees, jambalaya cooked with smoked sausage, coffee doux comme l'amour (sweet as love) boulli, and later, after supper, they would have calas tout chaud and old claret.

Hot tears stung his cheeks, and with forlorn, absent gaze he watched the fluttering pigeons swooping down to claim their supper of crumbs and crushed cake. He was so hungry he wanted to get down on the grimy sidewalk with them and lap up the crumbs.

"What'll I do? What'll I do?" he cried into his hands, his elbows propped on his wide-spread knees. "I can't just give up and die here!"

"It can't be all that bad, now can it?" came a masculine voice out of nowhere.

Mel quickly jerked up his head, his tear-rimmed eyes locking on a tall lanky man dressed in clothes that seemed to be from another day, another time: wide lapels, a slouch hat, like James Cagney or George Raft would have worn in one of their gangster movies. A kook!

"Leave me alone!" Mel cried, defensively, wiping his eyes.

"You're crying," the man declared, without obvious ridicule.

"Got something in my eye, that's all," Mel explained. "This blasted, dirty March wind."

"Coming in like a lion instead of a lamb," the man said.

"What'd you say?"

"Oh, nothing," the man said musingly, waving his hands. "Just remarking about this weather. I'm like you. I hate March. I've always hated the wind. It musses me up, makes me feel positively unclean."

Mel said nothing to that, just eyed him steadily like a watchdog, not liking the man's looks—as if it mattered right then what he looked like.

The intruder sat down on the next bench, laid a hand boldly on the back rest.

"I want to be alone," Mel said, his voice sharp with aloofness and rejection.

"Someone dead in the family?" asked the man, as if he had not heard Mel's declaration or, if he had, ignored it. He leaned a hair closer.

"No, sir," Mel answered, leaning forward purposely to avoid his nearness. He had always hated clawing people, people who seemed to be compelled to touch, to brush shoulder to shoulder. "I told you once, got something in my eye. Is that a crime in this dump of a city?"

"Young and green and broke in the big city, eh?" the man said, contentiously. "Well, I like them like that." He threw a challenge. "Despise those knowy numbers who loiter around the My-O-My, and Dendy's. Give me the green ones from the country."

Mel gave him a hard, belligerent stare.

"Well, you're broke aren't you?" the man insisted.

Mel refused to answer. He stared disinterestedly at two men who came up to one another in the square, had a few words, then departed together.

The man tapped him on the shoulder with a forefinger.

"You can make a few easy bucks you know—the easiest you've ever made—and enjoy a simple pleasure in the bargain."

Mel gave him a sharp look, then allowed his gaze to swing round to a young girl and boy, both in mini-skirts and cat boots, passing directly in front of them. They had their heads together, their identically styled hair to their shoulders. They giggled foolishly.

"How?" Mel said finally, the gnawing in his guts torturing him into weakness by degrees. He tried to sit up, brushed his shoulder against the man's hand on the iron bench back. He leaned

forward again, resting his elbows on his knees, his hands folded one in the other.

"I like them like you," the man said, not answering Mel directly, but still, the latter sensed, too directly, hoping to go as far as he could with Mel and as quickly as possible. "Hard, clean, good bones that show through the flesh. Take that sailor kid I met at Dendy's last night. He was okay as hustlers on leave go, but if I had seen you first I would rather have had you."

Mel swallowed hard. He didn't know what to answer. He sensed what the man intended, but he remembered sharply, like a church school lesson, what boys felt about such men. He had heard wild rumors of such deviltry going on somewhere, of such pairing-off; boys bragging afterward how much money they had made; but it all had passed over Mel like a meaningless zephyr.

Into the square now, pouring up the wide steps from the Cafe Demonde, came a Salvation Army Group, drab in their dark blue uniforms, weighed down by drums and brass horns. They went to the center of the clearning where a number of people had clustered on the circular wrought-iron benches — dock-workers, sailors, deck-hands from foreign ships, and a few bosomy women.

One of the Salvation Army girls, a flat-chested emaciated creature looking no more than fourteen, almost like a frail child masquerading in her mother's skirts, passed around a tambourine. A few coins were tossed in, a few smiles were conjured, as the band and singers struck up:

"On Jordan's stormy banks I stand
And cast a wistful eye . . ."

Mel blinked, his young spirit dropping like hot lead to the bottom of his soul. The hymn, mournful, lay like a warning over his heart. He tried vainly to snap out of his down-and-out mood, his gnawing hunger, his despair. He'd find a way out. There had to be some way out!

The hymn continued, hautingly, beckoning:

". . . I stand
And cast a wistful eye
To Canaan's far and happy land
Where my possessions lie."

"Twenty bucks!" the man said, giving him the fish eye. "Take it or leave it."

Mel gritted his teeth. His palms became damp, clammy. He could feel sweat at his armpits and on the inner side of his thighs.

He gulped: "Where would we go?"

The man smiled, displaying gold-capped front teeth. "Behind the retaining Wall. There are steps going down below Dumaine Wharf. Take us but a minute."

Mel nodded.

The man got up, motioned for Mel to follow. They crossed the square, down the steps past the Salvation Army group, across Decatur Street, and over the little metal bridge leading from the Jax Brewery. As they crossed the railway tracks, the sounds of the singing voices became faint and died:

". . . happy land
Where my possessions lie."

Mel felt his legs grow weak. His hands trembled and he doubled them into fists, thrust them into his jeans. His mind was clogged by thoughts of home, girls, his mother and father (no doubt at this moment sitting on the front porch, his father absorbed in his strong pipe and the Times Picayune, his mother occupied with multi-colored embroidery or knitting, her wrinkled old hands sending the needles through the yarn like deadly rapiers).

He followed the man reluctantly down the shaky wooden steps to the edge of the water. The smell of mold, stagnant water, and rotting wood thickened the evening air. Gulls, sweeping in low, their red eyes somehow terrible in the failing light, looked on curiously, pausing in mid-air and then sailing gracefully toward Algiers.

The man looked around, warily investigating, certain no one was in sight. He then gave Mel a loving look, his eyes glittering madly in the light. "You can stand. Just spread your legs a little. I'll get on my knees."

"The twenty first," Mel said, his hunger for food and a place to rest sharpening his practicality.

The man took out his wallet, thumbed through a stack of bills, took out a twenty, handed it willing to him. Then he quickly dropped to his knees, his hands on Mel's hips.

"Unzip your jeans?"

Mel, with trembling, unsure fingers, obeyed.

APRIL

It was late evening, an hour before twilight. Mel leaned against the wrought-iron gate posts that opened into the square from Chartres Street. He was watching with mixed interest (a blend of boredom and of mild curiosity) a bewhiskered artist putting finishing touches to a pastel chalk portrait of a madonna-faced girl hardly out of her teens.

The artist was a symbol of filth and degeneracy. His beard, as black as a swamp bear, was ill kept, and he scratched it constantly with the butt end of his chalk, rubbing the vari-colored smudges into its thick, wiry nap. A red kerchief was tied around his neck, chokingly tight; his bleached jeans were smeared with paint and looked like one of those crazy abstract works of art that hung in the Pontalba Buildings.

Beside Mel on the sand-covered iron steps sat Rusty, a boy about his age he had met previously making his evening rounds in the square. He was from somewhere far off in Texas, wore skin tight levis with sliced pockets and silver studs, cowboy shirts, and worn yellow leather cowboy boots. A Stetson, brim curled like a Roman scroll, sat perched on the back of his head, revealing unruly, sandy hair which persistently fell in his bright blue eyes framed with enormous black curling lashes.

"Are all artists queer?" Rusty asked, as he looked at the bearded chalk artist out of the corner of his eyes.

"How would I know?" Mel grunted. He hated that word. Hated everything even remotely connected with scores.

"A guy picked me up by Lake Charles one time," Rusty kept on talking loosely, chewing on a parched peanut. He always carried peanuts around with him to munch on, and he tossed the hulls to a flock of pigeons which scurried after them. "He said art was a queer profession, painting, ballet, music, all that jazz. Said he never had met an artist who wouldn't suck a rod. But how would he know? That guy over there with the goat whiskers, he looks like he could whip the pee outa me. Bet no one would walk up to him and call him a gubber-gobbler, now would they?"

Mel gave the bearded artist a second look. "He does look kinda strange, don't you think? His eyes, maybe, like ice in a whiskey glass."

Rusty gave him a cock-eyed stare. "What a

description! More like tumble bugs in a pile of cow shit to me."

"See," Mel laughed, as if possessing the wisdom of the ages. "No two people see things the same, so who can say if all artists are qu— like that?"

Rusty threw back his head and laughed, his hair tossing recklessly over his bright blue eyes. "You sure hate to say that word *queer* don't you, Babe." He called everyone Babe, male or female. "Don't knock it. Makes our living, don't it?"

Mel hung his head. A tiny prickle of shame turned his ears red, made him blush. He had not been hustling as long as Rusty, did not yet quite realize the score. He still felt he was playing his true nature a lousy trick—switching to males. But, as Rusty said, it made their living.

"I hate everything about it," he blurted out wrathfully, as he thought momentarily of home, his family, his clean, country neighbors, the people who had given friendship and trust: people who would regard his present profession as loathsome. He would never be able to face them again.

"Why you do it then?" Rusty asked point-blank.

"I can't answer that," Mel said, defiant.

"You mean you don't want to answer, don't you, Babe? You know, if you put it into words, you start thinking and if you start thinking then you'll want to walk out of it forever, but you know you can't. Now isn't that it, Babe, huh?"

"I reckon," Mel answered, watching a clean-cut girl with a shiny new guitar walking through

the square. "Hell I don't know! Why do people do anything they do? Why does the whole world tick the way it does?"

Rusty was amused. "It's getting to you, isn't it, Babe!"

"Go to hell, Rusty!"

Rusty let out a roar of laughter, throwing back his head. He tossed a peanut into the air, caught it in his mouth.

Mel threw him a hard, cold stare. He liked Rusty. In fact, he was his only friend since his flight to New Orleans, but at certain times, especially on evenings when he felt blue and homesick, Rusty's carefree attitude grated on Mel's nerves. He wished he could be more like Rusty: happy go lucky, not giving a hang about anything, always laughing, even though at times he didn't know where his next meal was coming from or where he was going to sleep. Nothing seemed to concern him. But Mel realized that he was different from Rusty. He *did* care. He worried a lot about things. And he *did* hate his present situation, he had told himself numerous times.

"Don't look so stern," Rusty scowled, but laughing still. He made a face at Mel, screwed up his brow until it was furrowed with wrinkles. "Worrying will add not one more day to your life." His mind seemed to go blank. "Now where did I hear that?"

"Jesus," Mel explained. "In the sermon on the mount."

For once Rusty looked serious. He looked at the crowd of young girls crowded around the bearded artist, bidding for the next sitting.

"Let's cut out!" he said, pinching Mel on the calf of his leg. "Them giggling quail give me the creeps!"

Rusty got up from the hard iron steps, stretched, and they ambled slowly through the square, paused at the statue of Andrew Jackson on the rearing horse, as though they hadn't already seen it a thousand times and on occasions exactly like this one, biding their leisure until a score spotted them and made a bid.

"Every time I look at that horse I get envious," Rusty said.

"Me too," Mel replied, knowing what Rusty was thinking.

"I don't know what for though," Rusty added, squinting. He rearranged his Stetson, set it at a dashing angle over his right eye. "Mine are already so big these old scores can't mouth them, even them that takes their false teeth out. But I was the same way when I lived in Texas. Everytime I saw that strawberry roan of ours I'd get all jealous and envious of his balls. I reckon every man wants some bigger than he's got. Just human nature."

"Big balls is where all the power is," Mel reminded him, and they chuckled like kids. Then, as if automatically withdrawn into themselves, their expressions turned serious again.

"Let's go over and sit on the wall," Rusty suggested, giving Mel an inquisitive eye. "The scores ain't out yet. Don't feel much like letting one of them dangle on my rod, anyhow. How 'bout you?"

"I'm broke," Mel said, dejectedly. "I just got to score."

"You *can't* be broke," Rusty cried, glaring at him accusingly."I saw you follow that gook in the monkey suit into the Hotel Roosevelt. Rooms cost a pretty buck in that swanky joint, so he *must* have laid at least a twenty on you. And I bet you didn't stay more than an hour. Guys who take you there are scared out of their fruity minds."

Mel looked at him crestfallen. "He gave me five, Rusty, and that went for food and a bunk at the Y.M.C.A."

"Boy are you a pigeon a real lame one if I ever saw one. Listen, Babe! You're a good-looking kid. These old chicks go for you. Why, last week, remember that grinning shitass from Algiers, the one who came up to us at Lafitte's? He would have dropped me like a hot potato for you, but you wouldn't go!"

Mel hung his head. "I didn't like his lousy looks."

"Looks!" Rusty cried, flinging his hands wide, the remaining peanuts flying from the paper bag. "Babe! What do looks count? We—you and me —we're hustlers, see? We're not like them! We don't go with them cause we dig that crap. We go for the lettuce, Babe. So if he's fat, tall, bald, what gives, Babe? All their mouths feel the same, rotten!"

"If I don't like their looks I won't go!" Mel stormed, gritting his teeth. "I have to draw a line somewhere!"

"Alright! Alright!" said Rusty, trying to calm him down. "Boy! You sure can blow your cool quick! I got a few bucks. We can eat. You've bought me grub. I like you. You're not like

these other mangy bums lousing up my territory. Let's talk, skip the scene tonight, what you say? Do us both good. If we stay away from the square a night or two they'll miss, pay double." He ended with a satisfied laugh. Mel tried to follow suit.

"We still gotta sleep somewhere."

"We'll make out, think of something," Rusty assured, waving a hand in dismissal of the difficulty. "Boy, you sure stick to rules! Breakfast, lunch, supper, bath, bed! Like life's got to go in some kind of proper order."

Mel said innocently: "I can't help it, Rusty. My whole life's been like that. I knew every day what I was going to do, that the next day would be the same as this one. I can't get used to living hour by hour, without a plan, without any future."

Rusty placed a hand on his shoulder. They paused at the corner of Decatur and St. Peter's Streets until the light changed. "Listen, Babe. Hang loose. We're free, Man. Nobody to say don't do this, don't do that! You and me, we're free to do as we please. This whole city is ours to play in, all this empty sky, all this water. We don't have to ask nobody nothing. We eat when we are hungry. We sleep when we are tired. We do what we want to do. So just hang loose, *enjoy* the scene."

Mel said nothing, and they crossed the street in silence, skipped over the little bridge at the Jax Brewery, climbed over its railing and jumped upon the retaining wall. Half way between the Cafe Demonde and the brewery they sat down, straddling the wall so that they could

observe the square and the Gulf area, the river, and see toward Algiers as well.

"Look!" Rusty yelled, not caring who heard, waving his muscular, sun-tanned arm in salute. "We own the world. Take it, Mel Babe, and enjoy it!"

He laughed exultantly, as if his pockets were jammed with greenbacks, and the world lay at his feet, subservient to his whim.

"Mel," he went on, as Mel drank in his every word, momentarily distracted from thoughts of home, his father and mother who remained in his memory constantly, waking or sleeping. "Mel, if we were both millionaires, we *still* couldn't own what we see right now. That's the way I look at it. The square. The old Mississippi, as far as our eyes can see, all the way to the horizon, we couldn't buy it with all the money in the world! But it is ours, as much as it is the next man's. We can only share it, as everybody else can, just share it." He looked at it all then, shifting his robust behind on the cold cement wall so that he could drink in the square, the Cathedral, the Pontalba Apartments, Cafe Demonde, the winding river strung with boats, Algiers, the distant horizon shimmering, red against the sky. He thrust out his lower lip. "Like papa once told me —an old Indian legend: anyone or anything you want, this Indian said, is on *this* side of the mountain."

Mel thought different, but he made no comment.

Rusty looked grim. He propped up one leg, catching the heel of his cowboy boot on the edge

of the wall for support. He curled his arms lazily around his knee, rested his chin on it.

"I don't know why I'm so lit up over this rotten fire-trap, but I am. It turns me on, Babe. You can take it easy here, just slide along, spread your legs once in a while, and slide some more. Easy, crazy living. No worries, no nothing."

Mel gazed at and wondered about Rusty. They were so newly met, strangers really, with but one thing in common, hustling. Mel had bumped into him late one evening in front of a souvenir shop along the Pontalba Terrace, both nostalgically thumbing through a rack of colorful postcards, and instinctively each had known the other's trade. Immediately they had become friends.

Mel wondered sometimes why Rusty had turned hustler. He certainly did not look like the kind of guy who would go to bed with a man; just the opposite—rugged, hard, like he would knock a guy flat if he so much as looked at him cross-eyed. Before he knew it, prodded by his curiosity and Rusty's talkative mood, he asked him why.

"I'm like you, and maybe a hundred other kids in this flop city," he answered softly, hanging his head. "I can't answer that. I wish I could I wish I *knew* how I got started at it, then couldn't quit." He turned flashing, contentious eyes on Mel. "Oh, don't get the notion I'm one of *them* guys. I *ain't*. I take to girls like any red-blooded American male. But I just never did like to work, to get up at a certain time, go to work at a certain time, get off at a certain time, go home, all that monkey jazz. That's for the

lame, Babe. I like to just drift with the tide. You know what I mean?"

Mel nodded, though he understood but vaguely. His life had been one of order and discipline and, though the life of ease and grace sounded wonderful when it was put into words, or was shown on a TV or theatre screen, it had its inevitably unpleasant drawbacks.

"Where you from really, Rusty?" he asked, though this was a question one hustler usually avoided asking another, for obvious reasons, the reason being that each of them had a past, skeletons in the closets, dirty linen not to be aired, especially for the ears of a rival.

But Rusty, unlike the stamped and branded hustler, did not seem to mind. Like everything else, he took it in good-natured stride.

"Actually I'm from Port Arthur," he said, shifting his position again on the wall. "My behind was getting saddle sores, and believe me, Port Arthur ain't the showplace of the world. The very end, Babe; it's the end of everything—like the last chance saloon!" He chuckled. "Oh, I had my kicks! What boy doesn't, no matter where he's from? I broke a few broncs, fished in the Sabine when I took a notion, ran away into the bootleg section when I got a wild hair, but my Papa was a strict one, he was. Hard as a horse shoe and not a speck of play in him anywhere. All salt, not a grain of sugar. No sirreeee! He worked all his life—never had a thing to show for it, and I reckon he wanted me to do the same. But I turned over another bit of philosophy for *him* to chew on. I told him one day that if you worked all your life and still didn't

have anything to show for it—then why not *play* all your life and not have anything to show for it. Papa didn't take to that so hot. That was when he told me what the Indian had said and, like a smart-ass, I said there wasn't nothing on this side of the mountain neither. And I was dead wrong. I know now. Then I didn't." Rusty stopped talking for a moment, reached for a cigarette, discovered he was out, spit, watched the wad fall far down the height of the wall into a pile of beer cans and fishing poles. "Wrong about a lot of things then I reckon. Oh, I worked, hating every minute of it; worked in the fields, plowing, got a gash on my heel to show for it, have to buy my boots now a half size bigger than I used to, but that's life, I reckon. One evening I got mad with Papa, ran off into Port Arthur, some guy picked me up in his yellow convertible. I didn't have a grain of sense then. He started playing with my leg, then got on up to my zipper and turned me on, Man!" Rusty let out a pensive sigh, as if again living through the scene. "Funny! After that I guess I gave away a thousand dollars worth before I learned you could sell it! Got real shiftless and mean after that one time; kinda felt good just laying there, letting a man have his kicks. Papa ran me away from home, with Mama bawling. Guess that's why I don't ever take up with one girl. All that mush. Christ!—I just don't like to be around people who get all gooey. Mama was a sour one for all that. She'd bawl if a cat died, if a cow got the anthrax, treated me like I was a baby. And me shaving and jacking off. Well," he breathed heavily, taking in a lung full of fresh air. "That's

all water under the bridge now, Mel Babe. But I don't have a gripe. I kinda like this slow, easy moving. I can pick up a few bucks anytime I feel like it. Know quite a few scores in this sex hole, and most of them like seconds and sometimes thirds. They say they're not afraid of me like they are most of these punk hustlers, not afraid I'll clip them or drop them or something. Course I *know* why they keep coming back. They like this root I've got. And I can come quick when I'm in the mood for that kind of rotten shit. I never get less than ten. So what the hell! A ten spot will take me through the day and night, and I'm fresh for the next one. I don't cheat them, I can tell you that, not like some of these dirty hustlers who rat anyway they know how on a guy. I feel that if he's paying for his kicks then he ought to get his money's worth, just as if he was paying for a suit of clothes, a set of wheels or something. Course I don't dig this scene, but I feel if a guy gets his kicks swinging on my root and I get money for letting him, who can say that's bad? Course, I can always take out some cute chick on the money I've made off of scores.

"Do they know? The girls, I mean?" Mel asked, considering it rather odd that Rusty could switch from men to women so readily.

"Sure they know," he said, his face cracking with a broad grin. "These New Orleans chicks could care less. All they want is your root when you're with them. You could stick it in a knothole in a log an hour later for all it concerns them. But that makes me happy too. Don't get attached that way, just fuck them and leave them, like they say in the army." He chuckled.

"One time I made out with a score right in front of a chick I was going with ... ah ... Dolores was her name, I think. Later she said what I did was my business. Naturally we took the money he paid me and blew it out at the carnival on Lake Ponchartrain. Crazy kids, us! Later that night, after we got high on draft beer she asked me how it felt and I told her try it and see and dammit! she did." He screwed up his face, spit. "I don't take to *that* too hot. A girl gnawing on your root, makes me uncomfortable, embarrasses me. I'd rather have a man do it. It's kind of a man's game, two men, not a man and a woman."

"*I* couldn't go through with it," Mel declared, imagining the scene in his mind. "It's bad enough with a man."

Rusty examined the sky, the sun sinking over the new Trade Mart Tower in the west. He scuffled to his feet. "Camping time, babe," he said.

Mel got up and they descended the wall, crossed the street and into the square. As they were doing so, two young boys, holding hands, met face to face with them, angled, and crossed to the other side going toward the Cafe Demonde, their tight levi-clad behinds as revealing as the bump and grind of the strippers on Bourbon.

"I never make it with that kind, Babe," Rusty said, motioning behind him with his thumb. "Not swishers. They want you for nothing, and like to make love to you, like they were *real* girls or something. I don't take to smooching girls, let alone boys."

The square was crowded. All the exiles making

the sex scene. Hustlers (in the costume which branded them all, jeans, boots, loud shirts) sprawled on the iron-lace benches, running their hands along their legs, advertising, making the scoring less complicated and less time-consuming. In locations such as this park—where practically everyone figured to be recognized on sight—preliminaries to sex charades were usually lacking, if not dispensed with entirely. Masculine homosexuals fawned over the young merchandise as if shopping for precious heirlooms, or gaudy gew-gaws. The queens and the nellies, there to be seen and to be ridiculed later, meandered through the flagstone alleyways boldly and audaciously. There, like so many bosomy matrons of the clique, grimacing at who was pairing off with whom, who was having to pay to score, putting them down later, and with boisterousness, cornering the most attractive ones for themselves, being seen with the attractive butch ones at least, as a hedge to their popularity, and paying, if they were escorted beyond the square at all.

They were all there tonight, it seemed to Mel as he strolled idly with Rusty beside him whistling: the parading queens—vampy—male-girls, vague parodies of real girls, ghost girls—frustrated ones who never score, usually munching on peanuts or popcorn to assuage their nervousness; the futile ones, those of age, who prowl rather than stroll, sneaking up on their victims, or watching wantonly from a distance; those with invisible masks—prim, sedate—sure that no one suspects them when everyone does; the clip artists who are always too eager, too ready,

their dark eyes drugged on want and privation and despair, haunted; the younger, greener hustlers, hoods actually, with that unmistakable stance, assuming the stance, and not because of their true nature; and those who haunt these dark avenues like Rusty really and perhaps Mel, though he dared not mention it to anyone, least of all to himself, the mad terror of hustling, loathing, and dread stamped into every frantic gesture, in every empty pose of unconcern—the gargantuan nothingness of this scene.

It was deplorable! Mel loathed it with every fiber of his being, the idea itself dragging on his consciousness like an enormous stone about his neck. But he was mercifully saved from its endless pit by this nonchalant reserve he had, as Rusty saved himself by his carefree, happy-go-lucky demeanor. They both were wearing masks, hiding behind their assumed unconcern, their deliberate pose, however casual, this horror at their frail existence, their futile hope of surviving this erosion of their every moral precept, their every manly significance, their fatal surrender wholly to these dark and ghostly gods who demanded, sought, beguiled, promised a futility they dared not admit to themselves, as a man who contends there is no God.

They paused before the statue of Andrew Jackson where two young men, looked like one, locked in each others arms, an arabesque grotesque and menacing in the shadows. On the curb, in the half light, sat an old man and a kid hardly out of his teens, and around one of the iron-lace benches, at least a dozen giggling queens were

bidding for a husky stud in jeans and a football sweater bearing the colors of purple and gold.

Hi's and hello's drifted into the night as Mel and Rusty passed young men, some they had scored with, others they had only talked to, or had scored with too, not completely remembering. Shapes, dark and indistinguishable, sometimes two, sometimes one, loomed amid the scented azalea bushes and peered out of the lacework of fern and palm, ghost beings of some mutual and licentious understanding, daring and relentless in this discernment. Grinning faces, faces illuminated by a match, a cigarette lighter, the flare-up of a cigarette suddenly in the blackness, beckoning, almost demanding, like spies in the midst of enemy territory, trapping their victims with silver eyes, a nod, a gesture, demands and counterpoints in semaphore.

Sometimes voiced words were not essential. Eyes talked, even in the dingy darkness. Lips spoke that did not move. Bodies followed bodies by a mere gesture of the hand, a nod, a lift of an eyebrow. As if strung with magnets, forms interlocked, went off together. Beings, only dark shapes, pulled toward one another, merged. At times a certain way a cigarette was held precipitated a certain carnal liaison. The roll of an eye, a stance, a groping at the crotch, a wink, a deft smile, eyes that locked, held, cunning revolt, unconcern—the master snare of them all.

It was this natural unconcern which drew, like a moth to flame a middle-aged man, robustly masculine, to lock his wanton eyes on Rusty. The sign was given. The game was begun . . .

Rusty immediately responded.

"He's my kind of score," he said to Mel who, more curious than knowledgeable about this unpredictible scene, glanced in that direction.

"We'll have to split. See you 'round, Babe!" Rusty was off, following the muscular score out of the park and toward the French market.

Mel watched faint-heartedly, regretting to see Rusty go and leave him alone, thought of what the man would do to Rusty, with a sense of revulsion. Rusty was such a clean kid in his eyes, despite his exaggerated bravado.

Mel sat down on one of the benches, remembering dully that Rusty had forgotten to share his few bucks with him, considered the gnawing ache in his guts, settled his mind that he would have to spend the night alone, hungry, in the square. But he didn't mind too much. He had camped out here numerous times, not that he could not score, but only that he could not endure contact with the kind of men who so eagerly propositioned him.

It was at those times—hungry, miserable, unclean—gazing with loathing at the dingy men who stood over him, making their proposals, that he had longed to escape, to run, to hide, to run again back to the paradise of his youth before Jackson Square, before the anxious, dripping mouths, before the clamorous hands pawing, groping, the maddening male voices sighing sickening nothings into his rebellious ears. He wanted to run now, after hearing Rusty tell of his life, wanted to flee, as he watched Rusty going off into the night with the score.

A man came up to him. He was dressed as a longshoreman: dark blue jeans, a jumper, a cap

on the back of his head. His hair was black, curly, oily, in gypsy ringlets. He was huge, hard of bone and muscle. Black, wiry hair stood out on the backs of his hands and along his neck where his jumper collar lay unbuttoned.

"I got a room over on St. Philip, kid," the man said to him, sidling up closer, said it directly, as if, through some international pattern of conspiracy, he understood everything. "You lonely? Beats sitting here all night. Lay a ten on you. What you say?"

Mel gave him a second look. Instantly he thought of Rusty. He got up from the bench and followed.

MAY

"What you mean, you're not a male hustler?" asked the fat man plumped down in a chair beside Mel and Rusty, his face like gray biscuit dough, a stubby cigar puncturing his jaws.

"Cause I'm not," Mel said, thinking with guilt of all the men who had paid him since his exodus to New Orleans two months ago. He *was* hustling. That he admitted to himself, but not with just anyone. He had always refused to go if he disliked the looks and manner of the score involved. He didn't want this fat slob either, so, with Rusty's help, he was trying to put him down as far as possible.

The fat man, who called himself Charles, sucked on his cigar, and with each puff, drawing his breath in so that he sounded, Mel thought, like a Jersey bull pricked in the balls with a hay-fork.

"Don't get high and mighty with me!" he said raspingly, his small bue eyes glittering savagely. "I've been around, kids. I know this town like I know the palm of my hand. Know those who will and those who won't. I saw you in the square yesterday." He pointed his cigar at Mel. "Saw you go off with that lanky carpet salesman from Algiers. I know that pansy personally. I know what it takes for him to get his kicks. You're his type all right: muscular, dark, sun-tanned—not too pretty, but pretty enough—right off the farm —that kind gets him rawled every time."

Rusty slung a hot gaze at him. "What rawls *you*, Mister?"

The man called Charles grinned, his face jolly, like Santa Claus. "I can take 'em or leave him," he said, belching. "You kids want another drink?"

They both nodded. They were seated in the Finale, a lounge on the corner of Royal street, whose walls were plastered with enormous posters of movie stars, those of the dead era of the hedonistic Hollywood, most of them now but vague legends to people of Rusty's and Mel's age, Valentino in his costume of The Sheik; Jean Harlow looking sexy and leggy in white satin; Nita Naldi, the more modern ones, Marilyn Monroe, Clark Gable, gray and white images staring at them as if from the grave, hazy in the

smoky clouds that coiled lazily and hung lifelessly in the dark ceiling.

The fat man signaled to one of the waiters, himself a lanky, effeminate parody of that locked, secretive world. He brought beers for Mel and Rusty and a daiquiri for Charles, who tossed bills to the waiter. The latter grinned at Mel and Rusty, knowingly, his gaze locking on their spread thighs, emphasized in skin tight jeans.

"Been to the My-O-My lately, Charles?" the waiter asked, all gimmick and archly coming on.

Charles raked his eyes over those of the waiter. "What ails you, Minnie? You got the clap or something? You know I never take up with those prissy faggots! I like real men!" He shifted his gaze in wanton invitation to Mel, then to Rusty, as if they were merchandise on display and he could take his choice.

The waiter, with sensuous gyrations of his pelvic region, moved away from their table, turning once with hungry eyes to gaze back on Mel and Rusty who returned his interest with questioning stares.

"You go for that nellie type?" Charles asked, using his smoking cigar as a pointing stick.

"Shit no!" Rusty answered, slipping his cowboy hat down over his brow." If I want a woman I'll get a woman, and if I want a man I'll get a man—but who wants neither?"

The fat man let out a roar, a little wobbly now, his starving eyes caressing Mel. Then his expression changed to rock-ribbed seriousness.

"It's all the same, I reckon," he mourned aloud, his eyes now bitter and sad in the dim light. "This screwed-up world. Everybody chas-

ing everybody else, and nobody getting what he wants."

Rusty, amused by the fat man, said: "I thought you *always* got what you wanted. An hour ago you were spouting off about having anything in here, if you decided to have him."

"Just making my bids," the fat man grunted. He stuck the cigar between his pudgy lips, inhaled mightly, "I like 'em real tough," he said, eyeing Mel, then Rusty pensively. "Real he-men, I mean. Men who naturally take to women. I loathe these silly sissies! And the punk male hustlers! All of them queer as maypole dancers!"

"That's a mother-fuckin' lie!" Rusty cried, slamming his beer glass down on the table, one of the few times Mel had ever seen him mad. And he looked at him sidewise, glad momentarily that Rusty was giving back to the man some of his own medicine. "Hustlers ain't queer!"

"Come off it!" the fat man sneered, rolling the cigar in his mouth from side to side, chewing on it until his lips were stained brown. "That's what *all* you hustlers say!"

"If you go with a guy for money, it ain't queer!" said Rusty, trying his best to smile, to cool his flaring temper. "Mel and me here, we ain't queers. We like girls, don't we, Mel Babe?"

"You mighty right we like girls," Mel said in defense, remembering how he went for them down at Golden Meadow, out with them every weekend dancing at the barn dances, to church with them on Sundays, and flirting with them in high school.

"Why don't you go with them then?" the fat

man cried, putting them both down triumphantly. It stopped them cold.

"We do, don't we, Mel?" Rusty said after a moment of silence. "We take the money you lousy cruds pay us and spend it on the chicks," he laughed, twisting the hat on his head until it all but covered his eyes. "How does that grab you, wise-ass?"

The fat man's eyes narrowed to slits. The cigar bobbled. He sloshed down his drink.

"What makes you think I give a shit what you do with your sex money? You can cram it up their cunts for all I care, once I've had my kicks. All you hustlers just the same, talking girls but going to bed with a man. It appears to me, if you liked cunt all that much, you'd get out and get a job 'stead of digging paths in the pavement walking the streets. This ain't no living, turning your tail up to any man willing to toss you a bill or two."

"I get jobs," Rusty said gruffly. "But when the pressure starts crowding me, I up and quit, just like that." He snapped his finger in the fat man's face, as if challenging his know-it-all attitude.

"I've worked all my life," Mel replied, giving the fat man a deprecatory look. "Reason I don't get a job here is that I ran away from home. If I go to work I can be traced through my social security number, and I don't want them to find me."

The fat man shot him a malicious eye. "In trouble back on the farm, eh?"

In terse, sparse words, Mel gave him the

shoddy details, almost shame-faced, now, at putting them into words.

"A likely story," the fat man scoffed, puffing away on his cigar butt, a dark stain thrust in his jelly-like face. "Like I said, all you hustlers are the same. Always the same old story why you left home, why you picked up hustling, knocked up some girl, afraid you'll have to marry her."

"Well, it's the damned truth," Mel spat, loathing him more by the minute. "Hell!—Why am I telling *you* all this? It's none of *your* crappy business."

The fat man grinned. "I'll tell you why, pretty boy. 'Cause you want to sound like a real he-man in front of me, want me to think you're so hung up on girls. Let me tell you one thing, both of you, if you'll bend an ear. Every hustler I've ever blowed—and believe me, I've blowed plenty in this raunchy town—everyone of them tells me he is crazy about girls, when shit, man, if he was that crazy about them he'd be out chasing them like I chase boys. I know what I want so I go after it, see? I don't fool around. So, the way I see it, if I go for boys and chase them, why don't you two chase women, if you like 'em so God-damned much? You prefer men, that's why. Men."

He began to slobber at the corners of his mouth, his cigar butt falling to the floor, and there was a mindless glaze over his eyes.

Mel and Rusty looked at one another, as the fat man's words seeped into their rebellious consciousness. "Are you calling *us* fruits?" Rusty asked, belligerent, his eyes like hot glass.

"Suit yourself," the fat man babbled, his sex

starved eyes locked hotly on them. "If the shoe fits wear it, that's what I say."

"Come, Mel Babe, let's blow this joint!" Rusty cried disgustedly, getting up from the table. "Let this old shit-bag puke his guts to somebody stupid enough to listen to him."

Obediently Mel rose, pushed in his chair. The fat man's eyes, searching out Mel's body lustfully, came back to vivid life. "Now hold on. Now hold on!" he cried in drunken agitation, lifting a chubby hand as a magic wand to charm them back into his circle. "No offense intended. Buyyouallanotherdrink!" His voice, his words all ran together.

Reluctantly and only because both were broke, they sat down.

"Like you boys," the fat man went on, now reversing his attitude, "You're not like the rest that hangs around the square, feeling up your crotch, advertising, making the scene so cheap, the whole picture rotten. Like all there was to this frustrated world is pay and suck, which it ain't. Could be beautiful, if only you lousy hustlers would let it be. You're all mixed up, got the whole scene wrong. You think all a man like me wants is to get down on my hands and knees and gobble it. But you're wrong! Dead wrong! We want more, much more, and we're willing to pay the price—you name it! Friendship mostly, a nice young companion." He paused, eyed them both with a pleading gaze. "You stud hustlers go at it all wrong. Just because you're young, good-looking, hung like mules, you think you got it made, but you ain't. You know why?" He didn't give them time to answer. "You know why you

ain't got it made? I'll tell you why—cause you're stupid! Don't play your cards right. You walk the streets, see? Miserable, in rags, hungry, searching for a rich score who will set you up, give you money, a car, clothes, and when you're lucky enough to find him, what do you do? You fuck him, treat him like a dog, take every advantage of him you can, bleed him dry, never give him an ounce of affection nor thanks in return, and you do all this because you're telling yourself he ain't nothing but a queer in the first place, which in your screwed up world doesn't count. If one of you had the good sense to face up to the fact that he is a queer, to see the good he does you, to see all the sacrifices he's made for you, getting you out of jail, out of trouble, paying your traffic tickets, paying you out of jams with women—if you could or would let yourselves see through the fact that he is a queer then you might see on the other side that he is a pretty damn good friend, and a good Joe to have around."

He took out a new cigar, tore away the cellophane, and thrust it into his mouth. Rusty lit it for him, disgusted at the way he fumbled for a match. "Like I was saying, if you'd do what the money man says, listen to his good advice, obey him, you would have a nice setup. You could see the girls on the side, and have a neat income to tide you over for a lifetime, if necessary. But you hustlers just don't know the score, and you think you're too smart for the scores to find you out. So what happens? You wring out a score's patience, rob him blind, break his heart after he has grown to love you, and you end up right

back where you started: on the streets, looking again for what you just tossed aside. Now there's a bit of philosophy you both could soak up like the smart kids you are. Find yourself a good, clean man with money and respect him, listen to what he has to offer. You can't beat that. That's when this sordid life can be made into something beautiful and worthwhile—ah, let's have another drink."

The waiter brought over two more beers and a gimlet, eyeing Rusty and Mel with bold eyes, believing Charles to be sodden and less aware. He lingered.

"Go fly your kite, Buster," Rusty said to him, with contempt. The waiter gave him a cold stare, flipped the round tray like a musical tambourine, then swished through the crowd that milled around the bar.

"See that boy over there?" the fat man asked, pointing with his cigar to a lad standing beside the juke-box.

"Looks alright to me," Mel said. "Normal as blueberry pie!"

"You think," the fat man declared, letting out a derisive snort. "He's normal alright—a normal cocksucker!"

"You're putting us on, man!" Rusty cried, his laugh cocky shrill. "You want him to smack your teeth in?"

Mel gave the boy careful scrutiny. He was a robust, blond, the type seen on muscle beaches, his complexion smooth, bronzed, now sexually dramatized by the play of multi-colored lights spilling out onto his naked arms from the juke-box. He was dressed in sandalwood colored hip-

huggers, a wide belt of shiny black, and a black T-shirt trimmed in red.

"A has-been," the fat man went on proudly, basking in scandal. "Why, I've seen the time when every queen in the quarter was panting for his box. Couldn't be touched. Then he got in trouble with the law, couldn't get a job, started hustling. I guess he's been had by every faggot in New Orleans, a regular male-nympho. Turned as fruity as a ballet dancer. And overnight, get that, started acting nellie! Now, no one will pick him up, except tourists maybe, or those who cater to his type. A prime example of what I've been busting my gut trying to tell you two kids. Once you're in you can't get out, ever."

"Bullshit!" said Rusty, his look and attitude contradictory.

"It's just a matter of walking away from here," Mel said, but as he spoke he was wondering if it *was* that easy. There was something about this life, this drifting, this being captive to anarchy that had its appeal; it was something he had to know more about to calm his uneasy response to a call he could not resist or identify.

"You think it's that easy," the fat man said, his voice filled with a knowledge of doom, "until you've tried it."

There was a catch at Mel's heart. He loathed this life, yet he was fascinated by it, drawn, conjured by something to which he needed to surrender; a life to which, unknowlingly and involuntarily he would sentence himself. He looked at Rusty and Rusty looked at him. In their apprehensive gaze, each of them read the fat man's words in the eyes of the other, and to

that message despite the revolt with which their consciences pulled against it, like two magnets, they were strangely drawn inward to it, victims and exiles in a world they both knew, instinctively, offered no roads back to escape.

"Now that that's settled," the fat man said, his eyes blazing on Mel. "What you say to twenty dollars?"

"I have a date," Mel lied, or partially so. He had promised a man he had talked to in front of the Pontalba Apartments that he would return later, but he wasn't sure. Hustlers are never sure.

"You broke then?" the fat man said, trying to corner him.

"Yes," Rusty said, answering for them both.

"I'll give you thirty then," the fat man bargained, shifting his enormous blob of flesh in the leather upholstered chair. "I kinda take to you, Mel. You're a clean kid. Be worth it to me. Give you a start. With thirty you can rest up from hustling for a few days."

"Alright," Mel answered, dreading the thought of having to go to bed with such a fat, repulsive son of a bitch.

"I live way out Veterans Memorial Highway," the fat man said blissfully. "Too long a drive. We can make it in the men's room. Your pal can wait. What you say?"

Mel got up from the chair, walking ahead of him into the men's toilet.

JUNE

"Do you think this place will be appropriate?" Glen asked Mel as they stood in the center of the small efficiency apartment and surveyed its possibilities.

It was a walk-up on St. Peter's Street, diagonally opposite from St. Louis Cathedral, small, with a Hollywood bed draped with a black velvet spread, a number of throw pillows, fan windows, a miniature patio framed in a terrace of iron-lace banisters overlooking St. Peter's, and a kitchenette not much larger than a clothes closet. But to Mel, who every night had had no inkling where he would sleep, it was a bit of heaven in his personal hell.

"It'll do. It'll *have* to do," he answered Glen, the score he had met in the balcony of the Saenger Theater (who had flipped over him at first sight) even in the darkness, with Kirk Douglas making his escape as a naked slave, emphasizing the sexual atmosphere more excitingly, punctuating sex play with the anarchy it engendered. Mel tried not to sound *too* overjoyed at the apartment (a hustlers gimmick—never get too carried away, as if you're used to better). As his anxious eyes picked out little things about the place, the old gilt-framed paintings looking down from the sky-blue plastered walls, the marble-topped furniture, the bronze statues here and there, the thick gold-brocaded drapes hanging from huge curtain rods, the shaded silk bed-table lamps on each side of the bed, a painting over the bed, done in flat tones directly on the plaster (a woodnymph chased by Pan), advertising the obvious—that an artist had once lived there—Mel considered it would do perfectly.

"Then I'll see you in two weeks," Glen said in an excited voice. "Be sweet." He caught Mel into his arms, bent his face to Mel's as Mel turned his cheek to him to kiss. He accepted this gesture, kissed him warmly on the little dimple next to the corner of his lips, and hurried down the wrought-iron steps to his waiting car. He waved back at Mel, who went out onto the balcony to make certain he was leaving. When the car started off down St. Peter's, turning west on Chartres, Mel went back into the apartment and slipped into the new clothes Glen had bought.

Blissfully, filled to the brim with festivity, he slipped into a pair of salmon colored hip-huggers with sliced front pockets, a wide shiny black belt, a racy paisley shirt, and black suede high-heeled jodhpurs. Brushing his sandy hair down over one eye in the new mod fashion, he bounced down the sunny, wrought-iron steps to the street below, marveling with a tinge of homesickness at the blooming festival of flowers which foamed over this moldy, mellow city: camellias, azaleas burning like neon lights, magnolias death-white in their covey of waxed leaves, bougainvillia hanging over the iron terraces like an altar of lit candles, gardenias in various shades, potted plants lined up along the steps like a miniature army, wisteria in grape-like clusters hanging over the windows, and daffodils like nosegays. From the sunny buildings, where every crack and crevice magnified itself harshly, sprang daggers of Spanish century plants, emerald leaves of slowly moving banana in the golden sun, and in the shade, under the boughs of cedar and formosa, the rich aroma of sandlewood spiced the air, stung his nostrils, invigorating, intoxicating.

He met Rusty in the square. He was sitting on the back of one of the circular iron-lace benches, his cowboy-booted feet resting on the seat, his lazy, languid gaze scrutinizing the park as if he owned it all, as if it were his personal territory, his corner of earth he ruled proudly and disdainfully.

"Well, fan me with a mule's prick!" he said loudly (too loudly, turning the heads of several nuns posed demurely in the dappled sunlight) as he noticed Mel. "You struck it rich, pardner?"

"Found me a sugar daddy," Mel told him, strutting before him in his new clothes. "Name is Glen—Glen Ogden, or something like that. Works at a recording studio in Memphis. Set me up in an apartment over on St. Peter's for a month."

Rusty set his Stetson to the back of his head, his sweaty hair instantly tumbling into his glittering eyes. "For all that, Mel Babe, you must a swung on *his*."

Mel gave him a go-to-hell stare. "You know better than that!"

"Guess I do," Rusty said, apologetically. "Knowing you like I do. You so damn particular, culling them like a rooster culling corn. You look like my Mel now, yes you do, Babe, in them fancy duds." He said "my Mel" with tenderness and warmth which pleased Mel who strutted up and down in front of the bench like a model, noticing how the sunlight picked up the sheen of his pants, absorbed the dark velvet texture of his jodhpurs.

"He wants me for himself," he said, pridefully. "Said he'd divor—ah, quit me on the spot if I even *looked* at another queer."

"Married now, huh?" Rusty said, laughing bitterly. His look drowned the light of his eyes with a film of dull gray, as if, through some personal agreement between him and Mel alone, he had been left out.

Mel shrugged. "I hate that kind of arrangement and you know it, Rusty. Like Glen and I were *married* to each other, all that loving crap. If I'm going to live with a—a queer at all I want

it to be on a man to man basis, not this man and woman shit!"

Rusty laughed a relieved laugh. "Some of old Rusty is rubbing off on you, huh, Mel Babe?"

"I reckon so," Mel answered, wondering painfully what he would have done these several months if he hadn't met Rusty. Rusty was his only friend, and he listened to Rusty, when he would listen to no one else. He could depend on Rusty, knowing he would never give him a bum steer, nor foul him up with the law, as would so many other hustlers in this square. He felt a strong kindship for Rusty, a trustworthiness rare among the inhabitants of this secret world.

"Well, I'm glad you've found someone," Rusty said with deep seriousness, not looking directly at Mel, but instead squinting at the sun blazing in its golden glory behind the Trade Mart Tower. "Keep you off the street. You too good for this life, Mel, just too fuckin' good. Never did belong here in the first place. You ain't like me; you don't have the guts to make out like I do—but I'm gonna miss you, miss you like hell." His voice died to a guttural whisper, and he blinked. "This Glen—Glen somebody gonna cart you off to Memphis?"

Mel looked up at the other sitting like a muscular god on his high throne and wondered why his voice had trembled when he mentioned leaving, why his eyes were so shiny with tears. "Hell, Rusty, I'm not going to leave," he explained, a lump rising in his own throat. "Glen won't be back for two whole weeks, and then only for a visit, maybe a weekend. That's why he got me this apartment, so he and I would have a place

to stay when he comes down here. Everything will be the same—honest."

Rusty lit up at that, light returning to his eyes, and his face broadening with a hearty smile displaying even white teeth. Then he gazed at Mel, his brow furrowed. "You gonna keep hustling? Other guys, I mean?"

"Sure, I'm going to keep hustling," Mel answered, prancing up and down before the bench, bringing starving eyes in his direction. "How will Glen find out? Him in Memphis?"

Rusty laughed so hard he almost fell off his perch. "You're learning, boy! You're learning! You're getting the hang of it. You got to swing along with everybody, whether you give a damn or not. If you start caring—then you've had it, Mel Babe."

He glanced away into the distance, pretending to watch two sea gulls making lazy semi-circles in the sky, as if, by watching their tactics, he might be able to avoid some dark purgatory to which he had been condemned.

Mel, climbing upon the back of the bench to sit beside Rusty, thought seriously about what his friend had said, and wondered forlornly if he would every genuinely care for this sort of life. Its fascination, though fleeting like a memory, a wraith, clung to his conscience like cotton clings to the weeds in the field lanes, and he was engulfed in it somehow, submerged, as if this whole anarchic world existed below the tides. The sudden outbursts of longing to be wanted, to be craved by someone, even by other men, held for him something of nostalgic yearning—and regret—for the world he had abandoned, the

love he had forsaken in exchange for this futile, aimless, drifting existence.

Beside Rusty, feeling the ebb and flow of his bodily warmth, Mel felt safe momentarily, secure and wanted in a way he could not understand.

"Rusty, do you *really* like this kind of life—hustling I mean?" Mel asked, feeling pensive, protected, wanted for the first time in months. "Do you think you will ever quit it?"

Rusty shrugged. "Someday, maybe. Have to someday, Mel Babe. The scores, them fruity cats, like 'em young, fresh. And I ain't always gonna be young and fresh. Guess I ought to be saving some of my sex money, put it back for a rainy day, but what the hell! I'll make out. Might pull out of the square one of these days, head for New York, maybe even Hollywood, get into them western pictures. I understand half them fancy, well built cowboys started by putting out to the directors and producers. 'Course I don't know, not really, just talk I guess. You know how them bitchy faggots run their rotten, goddamned mouths! Hate the living shit outa them! Had one of them once tell me he had gone to bed with Rock Hudson! Now, ain't that a lousy, fruity lie! Rock Hudson! So I told him, I said: 'Babe, that ain't nothing; *I've* been tricked by L.B.J.!' Which is the truth, actually. He's fucked *everybody*. Look at them poor kids in Viet Nam! Rotten world!"

He let out a troubled sigh. "Got a smoke?" Mel handed him the pack. "No, Mel Babe, I just don't know when I'll split this life. I kinda like having a man swinging on my rod, then paying for it. An easy living I call it. Getting paid for

thrills. I started to quit once." He lit his cigarette, watched several girls making their way through the square. As they passed he whispered: "Shake that money maker!" Then silence for a moment. "Yes," he went on again. "I started once to shag ass, split this drifting scene once and for all. Got me a job on Royal Street in the orange juice stand. You know, the whole front is plate glass so you can see the world. One afternoon I was sitting in the corner, looking out on the grimy scene when I saw a score go up to a young boy, saw them immediately get into a cab together. You know, I up and quit right then and there; threw down my apron, stalked out into the street. Ten minutes later, Mel, now maybe you think I'm lying, but ten minutes later I was laying up in the Roosevelt with a guy between my legs. Honest, Mel, my hand to God, I was!"

"Then you *can't* quit!" Mel said despairingly. He yearned to hear Rusty say that he would, that he would just walk off someday, but he knew, felt the answer before it came.

"Maybe," Rusty answered. "Maybe it's because I don't want to split, that I keep hanging onto something I think is good, hoping to score high stakes in this rotten game, I don't know. Score like *you've* scored with that fruit from Memphis. It's kind of like gambling, Mel. Everytime you play a round you're hoping to make it better. Like every man you score with, you say to yourself, 'now *this* one is *it*. He's loaded.' Someday, Mel Babe, I'll make it. I'll really score."

"I hope so," Mel declared dreamily, wishing

strangely for Rusty's happiness. He felt sorry for him now, though he did not understand why. Rusty was capable. He was rugged, good looking, built of hard bone and muscle, not washed out, pale, hungry-eyed like so many of the hustlers who roamed the square, picking up crumbs here and there. He wondered why Rusty was not the epitome of queerbait, the kind they all went crazy about, for even Mel liked to look at his muscular build, the way the veins crawled up his naked arms, the way he had of sitting with his legs high, spread, one thrust over the other, one ankle resting on the other knee, his soft eyes, his easy manner, his long, lazy strides, his gaze so jokingly, laughingly festive Rusty had a certain brand of recklessness, of intrigue, of daring and mischief. Mel had to think that any queer, young or old, nellie or butch, would fall on his face for Rusty, would buy him outright for a lifelong reign under his warm friendship, and for his apt lovemaking in bed. But it seemed to Mel, as he had witnessed Rusty's scores on numerous occasions, that the faggots mostly (at least those of the giddy set) dodged or plainly ignored him, took detours to avoid him, and that only the extremely masculine scores dared invade his realm for their unnatural sex pleasures. Opposites usually attract, he thought, but with Rusty and his sex partners, both were masculine to the extreme. It revealed a force there that frightened Mel sometimes, for it brought to a peak his own terror of undergoing change in his own sexual attractions. Rusty, though the most rugged of males, had turned only to equally rugged men and, if *this* could happen, then, unknowingly,

Mel felt there was every likelihood that his friend might become infatuated with the same sex as well.

Whatever was drawing Rusty would in time draw him, Mel surmised despairingly. A masculine force masked by something he could not comprehend largely due to his lack of experience and gazing at Rusty with a deep and restless admiration in his heart, like the boy who looked on the mighty Caesar in awe and turned into a homosexual, so did Mel feel something of this ecstatic quality, this fantastic doom breaking through and into his world.

Strangely, he was satisfied, content, in Rusty's presence, just sitting with him, listening to him talk, watching his reactions to the anarchic scene, even seeking him out when they split, hopeful of running into him, hoping vainly that he hadn't scored, but remained alone, free, untainted by another man's hands. And in this mood, feeling so warm and so wanted, he asked: "Rusty, do you like me . . . really I mean?"

Rusty turned to him and smile one of his reckless smiles. "Hell yeah, I like you, Mel babe," he cooed, rumpling Mel's hair. "You got my heart, boy. You cut your teeth on it."

JULY

"Whew! It's as hot as a firecracker in hell!" Rusty remarked, taking off his Stetson and wiping the sweat off his brow.

"And it makes you twice as sexy," Me. concluded, trying to laugh off what he had said with casual grace. Actually, he did think Rusty sexy, especially when sweat darkened the areas around his thighs, brought out the swell of his chest. The flimsy sweat-wet shirt was so thin that Rusty's hairy chest and his nipples showed dimly through.

"Them travel postcards over at the Pontalba are wrong as shit," Rusty declared, pointing in that direction. "That balmy south, tropical paradise, cooled by the Gulf, Garden of Eden, all that con game, money-making rot! No wonder the tourist trade here is good. Yankees flocking down here like migrating geese to get cool."

They were seated on the rim of the fountain in Jackson Square. It was around four o'clock, and a wind off the Mississippi, dank with the rancid odor of dead fish, was drifting in to invade the nostrils of the numerous people milling about the fountain, the statue, the flowering plants, crowding the benches like a weary army sitting out a break on a sixty-mile hike.

The magnolias folded their leaves, their brown undersides showing dully. The bougainvillia hung limply on the iron fences. The palms stood tall and still, not a frond moving. The banana leaves, like sails of emerald silk, slightly yellow around the edges, stood like a funeral lilies wilting under the murderous sun. Not a limb moved. Not a leaf stirred, and the only remembrance of coolness and fragrance was the sound of the rippling water in the fountain, the goldfish scurrying in the green circular world, a world like Mel's and Rusty's, from which there was no escape.

At intervals, between nibbling peanuts, Rusty dipped his hands into the water, ran it over his face, then wiped his hands on his shirt, his thighs. "I sure smell strong," he said, trying to laugh. "Never score tonight, smelling like this. I can feel the sweat running down my back like lice. Thought I had it rough in the cotton fields."

Mel was amused, smug in the latest outfit Glen had bought for him: kicky slacks of blond corduroy, a Granny print shirt with a long roll collar of white with white cuffs to match, boasting gaudy cufflinks of emerald green, a jade ring, a love ring actually made from chips of jade, mosiac fashion, sunk into a field of silver.

From across the square came a figure familiar to the white male hustling world, a flagrant negro queen, no more than eighteen, bold, frustrated, flippant, even for the south.

"Here comes your last chance," Mel said to Rusty, who took the situation in stride.

When the young negro was even with them Rusty said: "Shake that moneymaker, honey!"

This only stimulated the nut-colored queen, who turned on a heavy smile, showing a mouthful of gleaming white teeth. "Yo' white boys sure gets rawled up wiff us colored girls," he announced coquettishly, swinging his tight-pants behind. "Ain't no different in de darrrk!"

"Like hell it ain't!" Rusty gave him a scowl. Then snapped: "Shoo!"

The black queen picked up his pace, not looking back.

"Bold bitch!" Rusty said, running his hands along his thighs, as if, symbolically, he was wiping away the memory of him. He offered Mel some peanuts. "Puts lead in your pencil."

Mel took one, eyed two boys on the opposite side of the park, high school boys trying to make it like veteran hustlers. That memorized stance, attaining only a vague resemblance to a hustler's was a dead giveaway. An elderly man approached them. He mumbled something indistin-

guishable to Mel but very distinguishable to them. They followed him out of the square. Mel trailed them with his eyes, disinterested yet curious, saw them climb into the back seat of a car parked on St. Ann Street. The man got under the wheel. They drove off through the hot, shimmering traffic maze.

Poor kids! he thought. Searching for that blind something!

In the sunset light now, as the terrific heat began to cool under approaching dusk, the square began to fill rapidly. Encouraged by the tourist trade, all the inmates to this locked and mutilated world, exiles of anarchy to this purgatory, condemned by whatever they sought, began to infiltrate the nostalgic square, taking their teaheads, pale, shabby drifters, clip artists, fruit hustlers, vagrants, and bold, obnoxious stud hustlers, hustlers Mel and Rusty knew by name and reputation, trumped up, faked names to conceal their true identities and their pasts. They used names like Polo, Dink, Jesse, and Butch, and the rattier ones, ones who rarely scored unless with old winos, Micky, Bunny, LeBow, and Bratt, and the sickly, pimple-faced Shot.

With these—gaudily investing the drabness of the hustlers, bringing a certain festive life to the dull eyed, the drunken, the sodden, the half-starving—came the swishing queens and faggots, maliciously, bitchinly putting each other down, coy, trying to be seductive, demure, and vampish, devilish at the same time. These came in hordes, with usually and entourage of hustlers in hot pursuit, trailing, like sad waifs, the flaming queens who tolerated them, if for no other rea-

son, than to appear surrounded by male popularity, or as a weapon to show up their bitchy sisters. All dandyish ladies in trade, hoping to make it for free, to find this night (as they had searched vainly every other night) their true masculine mate—a knight in armor: a Gable, a Valentino, or a Romeo within this dark purgatory as endless as eternity.

The iron-lace benches were filled with giggling, painted fairies. Mod wear was in season, fashions at long last that the more feminine queens could wear without being self-conscious. Wigs too, were in abundance, some of them as long as permissible under Louisiana law. Others had real hair touching slim, bony shoulders, copying the male hippies in an effort to appear feminine. Eyes, stark and dark with shadow and pencil, fluttered demurely; bracelet-laden arms waved like so many rainbows. Paisleys, silk pullovers, floral button-down shirts, and pink and lavender slacks made striking contrasts amid all the jeans and black Wellington boots and muscle-distended T-shirts.

Youth was at its height, and in its glory, for here there was a greater premium on it, perhaps, than at any other time in history, the young and handsome being sought, the young themselves seeking. A fleeting, momentary thing for most in this historic square, and, realizing this painfully, they gorged themselves on its provocativeness, became rampant with their personalities so that, while youth and beauty lasted, they would siphon their share of life allotted to them under the unwritten codes which existed in this world of sham.

Mel and Rusty, seated on the circular fountain, spectators of this colorful, but frivolous scene, considered themselves, like most hustlers, not a part of the anarchy into which, willingly or unwillingly, they had flung themselves.

"Must be Valentine Night," Rusty remarked dismally, inspecting the flirtatious mob with venom in his eyes. "Little Miss Marker, Rebecca of Sunnybrook farm and all that lousy jazz." He tossed his peanut hulls into the fountain, watched with an abandoned sense of glee the goldfish scrambling to the top of the water. "All these young fruits with their crotches taped like girls with a Kotex. Even their balls don't show." He gave Mal a thoughtful look. "Babe, if you ever turn like that I'll turn you over my lap and spank your sexy butt."

"You sick or something?" Mel asked, wondering forlornly how *anyone* could turn himself out like these giggling kids. He wouldn't be caught dead on the streets dressed that way, swishing their behinds like girls, pawing, rolling their eyes, tossing their hips like the strippers on Bourbon. "The day I get like them, Rusty, I'll let you screw me ... how do you like *them* apples?"

"Green!" Rusty declared, screwing up his face. "Oh, my aching ass. Here comes the two fruitiest fruits in the whole, screwing world!" He nudged Mel on the arm. "Miss Satin and Miss Lace. Here they come. I think they've seen me. Treat them like they are girls. They eat it up."

Through the square now, along the circular flagstone path, wedged on both sides with azalea bushes long since divested of their flaming pe-

tals, came two figures which, at first glance, would be difficult to distinguish from those of real girls. But they were both boys, ageless in this secret world of the streets. They could have easily been either eighteen or thirty, so small they were of stature, so deceptive in their dress. Both boys wore pale, sky-blue jeans, white loafers without socks, and shirts which were gaudily bright, and Carnaby cut. If their hair was not false—wigs—then it was surely coiffured to appear so with ringlets around their ears and down around their necks. Their every mannerism was that of the complete feminine, without one smallest trace of masculinity.

"Oh, you living, breathing doll!" one of them cooed, spotting Rusty on the back of the bench. "Do you still love me, like you said you did once? Oh! don't answer that! If you say *NO* then I'll die, I'll simply die! die! die!" He pecked Rusty on the knee with a delicate finger.

"'Course I still love you, ah—Miss Lace," Rusty said, beaming, making a lot over him with obvious burlesque.

"I'm Miss Satin," the boy said with fire in his falsetto voice. Pointing. "*She* is Miss Lace!"

"Oh!" Rusty said, drawing up in a hump. "I can't tell you two girls apart. Like twins—honest."

Mel studied them with loathing.

"'Course you can tell us apart, honey," said the one called Miss Satin. "Remember that wild, gay night out at the Lake Pontchartrain amusement park? Remember? You were hugging me up a storm, and *all* the time calling me Miss Lace, 'cause you were drunk and all, then—then

afterwards in Randy's pad you came on strong with Miss Lace, thinking it was me, so we both got in bed with you at the same time to show you the difference. Remember? You said you'd know us apart from then on by the way—the way we did it. You *do* remember, don't you, Honey?"

Rusty went crimson. He looked at Mel sheepishly, then back to the two boys. "I reckon," he said, then changing the subject quickly with: "What you two girls up to?"

"Oh, let me tell you," one of them gasped. "I'm going to get in the movies! Imagine *that!* Little old me in the movies!"

Rusty thrust out his lower lip, grimacing, looking stern. "You're putting us on, Babe!"

"No, honest," he said, twitching this way and that, his bracelets jangling. "You know, the one with Steve McQueen in it? Well, I met this guy on the set, somebody important really, and they were looking for some girls to play convicts, and he said I would be a natural. A natural creole for the part, with a long black wig. Imagine little old me in a Hollywood movie in *high drag!* And everybody thinking me a real girl! Anyway—now everybody stop laughing—anyway, you know, they are shooting scenes up around L.S.U. at Baton Rouge. Some of the agricultural students up there have already made the sets, with sliced logs made into prison huts and rice fields, real rice fields, imagine! So this young boy, real cute numbaar too, he takes a shine to me, takes me out, like I was a girl, and he promises me *ever* so much, Rusty—not just a prick, like *you* promised. And he's going to make me famous. Ima-

gine! Me from this hick joint, in the movies, like Marilyn Monroe and all them other sexy stars."

"Bet you won't even speak to little old us," Rusty said, winking at Mel who couldn't help but laugh.

"'Course I'll speak," the queen went on, all excited. "And you can have my autograph, and I'll let you kiss me too. Honest!"

Rusty screwed up his lips. "I can *hardly* wait!"

"Let's go, Satin," the other one said, taking him by the hand, like two girls on a Sunday stroll. "This heat is shrinking my bra. Remember, Larry has us two blind dates at Lafittes in Exile, and it's five-thirty already."

"How can I forget," Satin cooed, waving farewell to Rusty and Mel as they minced on down the flagstone walk and through the gate at Chartres Street.

"Fuckin' fruits!" Rusty spat, remembering what the two had said about him and becoming acutely embarrassed by the memory.

"You didn't think so once," Mel said, a little concerned that Rusty, of all people would go for that type.

Rusty leaped off the bench. "Let's blow this scene tonight! Take in a movie—what you say? Just you and me. A good one's on at the Orpheum. It's on me."

AUGUST

"Mel babe, what is this Glen fellow like anyway?" Rusty asked as he and Mel sat in the afternoon sun at Lake Ponchartrain Beach. Mel was in shorts, but Rusty, not the beachboy type, had only pulled off his shirt, leaving on his jeans, his boots, and Stetson.

"He's a good Joe," Mel answered, squinting at the new Honda motorcycle Glen had recently bought him, noticing with a hint of new happiness, the way the sunlight bounced off its chrome like sparks, how the cool lavender of its gas tank shone radiantly, like a blossom. "Not like most we meet in the Quarter. Young, but not too young. Educated, polite, quiet-spoken. He don't hang around the gay scene, says he loathes that kind of life. Doesn't know any queens or faggots, hates them too. That's why he comes all the way

to New Orleans to go out with a trick. Says he has a reputation to uphold, so it's best I stay here and him there, and just visit now and then."

"Must be some fellow, quite a jewel," Rusty commented, admiring the new motorcycle parked on the sidewalk with envious gaze. "Sure you're not swinging on *his* rod, and not him on *yours*?"

"You lost your mind, Rusty?"

"Maybe you're being the girl and him the boy, huh? And he's giving the meat to you up the backdoor, huh? Maybe?"

Mel threw an outraged glare at Rusty. "Maybe *you're* ready for the insane ward at Jackson."

"Now don't get rawled, Mel Babe," Rusty said, patting him on the knee. "Just curious. You know, you've always been stand-offish, never would let me in on your little secrets."

"There are no secrets, Rusty."

"I mean, about you and this Glen fellow. Just what does he like to do? You must really have what he wants. An apartment, which you've never invited me to, a new Honda, and clothes. Boy look at the clothes!"

Mel looked up at him in surprise. "That's the first time I knew you wanted to be invited up."

"Oh, what the hell!" he grunted. "I mean—well, I am curious how it looks. You could let me have a peek."

"I'll remember that," Mel said. "When I know Glen's going to be in town I'll invite you up. Okay?"

"You make it sound so, so compulsory, Mel! Make it sound like you don't want to really, but would, just to be obliging."

A tiny thrill ran up Mel's naked spine. "I just wouldn't want Glen to catch me in there with anyone, if he happened to come into town unexpectedly, you understand that, don't you? Hell, what do you think he would suspect?"

Rusty let out a horse laugh. "He would probably think you and I had been having sex together."

"Exactly," Mel said. "Then my motor, my apartment, my clothes and my money would be finished."

Rusty gave him a cocky stare, then winked. "Ain't I worth all that?"

Mel smiled, thinking secretly to himself that he was. Rusty was worth all that in terms he could not gauge, though he sensed it, felt it in some strange, wonderful way. It was like evaluating a sunset, a painting, a great work of art.

"As far as I'm concerned you could bunk with me," Mel said, and he meant this profoundly. He would love to have Rusty around all the time. "But Glen pops up unexpectedly so much, and it would ruin everything."

"I know—I know," Rusty said, not looking at him, but instead squinting at two gulls swooping down on the lake to battle with a fish which had come to the surface. "It wouldn't work anyway." He dropped his eyes, watched as he dug into the sand with the heel of his boot. "Inside a week I'd be getting into your pants."

He laughed a bitter laugh then, almost the whisper of a laugh, an echo, as if undecided to make a light joke of it.

"You mean rape me?" Mel took the intimation a step further.

"Yes," Rusty murmured, his voice muffled, "if I had to."

"You wouldn't have to," Mel said, the tone of his voice equally low, intimate, desirous. "I'd give in before you could do that."

They were silent then, neither looking in the direction of the other, their heads bowed, their thoughts excitedly re-examining what the other had said. Finally Rusty glanced up, studied absently the white spires of the U.S. Coast Guard Station to the right, then to the towering Light Station to his left, in the brilliant light. A white shaft in the hot blue distance.

"We'll both be sprouting wings next," he whispered. Then he drew in a deep breath. "Makes me want to puke sometimes."

"If only it had meaning," Mel suggested, trying desperately to factor it out, to isolate the hub about which it turned.

"That's what's wrong with the whole lousy setup," Rusty said, with a sigh. He tossed a rock at a pigeon nibbling on a piece of hamburger. "No meaning. It's just suck and pay. Suck and pay. You never get to know the guys nor them you. You meet, get all fired up, turned on, he gets his—you get yours and you part, strangers. Almost like you're enemies then, like he's got something on you and you got something on him that both will use it if they have to."

"Maybe this kind of life wasn't meant to last," Mel tried to explain. "Like in the Bible, this Sodom and Gomorrah. How can it last? Nobody gives nobody else the time nor chance to fall in love, to belong to each other, so you never feel wanted."

"That's the reason I get so fed up at times," Rusty blurted. "Like pouring life down the shithole! Everytime you score you know what it's going to be, now it's going to turn out. 'Course I cater to girls, I like to screw 'em, but if you don't have gobs of money, what the hell? You have to say a lot of purty nothings to them, constantly do them favors, like you was their keeper or something, or maybe married to them. I don't mind shacking up with one of them for a while, but then you find yourself one morning buying groceries, or running to the drugstore for pills, or going with them to pick out sexy bra and panties, and all that slinky shit." He stopped talking, eyed the tourists, obviously tourists in their garish bathing costumes, tip-toeing down to the lake's edge. "But with a man, it's just the other way around. Kinda like they're flattering me; making a lot to do over my muscles; putting scented water in my bath; carrying on all over the place doing little favors for me, breakfast in bed, handing me my smokes, seeing that my clothes are clean, and all them different kinds of colognes and scents. I take to that like a bull to fodder." He scratched his head. "If it would only last—with the same guy—instead of a new one every day, one you never get to know. Like that guy there." He pointed out a man of about thirty, trim, neat in white trunks, dark hair, strolling alone on the beach, pausing to pick up a shell, to feed the gulls. "He's not a score. Bet he wants to find some guy who'll like him for himself alone, bet he wants some young stud to shack up with him, permanent. Be good friends, love each other."

"Kinda like Glen," Mel said, thinking back over their partnership together.

"He loves you?" Rusty asked, turning finally to face him. Their eyes, sun stricken now, locked and held.

"I guess he does, says so anyway. Wants me to live with him the rest of his life."

Rusty's eyes were strangely curious, and critical. "Would you?"

"Would I what?"

"Would you live with him, love him?"

Mel studied for a moment. He leaned back on one elbow, propped up both muscular legs. "He irritates me sometimes," Mel answered slowly, finally, as if declaring a secret he had promised himself never to reveal. "Smothers me. I can take just so much."

"Yeah. I'll buy that. Once they get their hooks in you then they start taking liberties. Like one man I shacked up with for about a month. Texas oil man. He got the notion I would take it in the rear, got drunk one night, blew his top when I wouldn't. I floored his ass. I don't like hitting a queer, kinda like hitting a woman. But some of them ask for it. Like one night I was in the Trailways Bus toilet. Some guy comes up to me, stands at the urinal next to mine. Know what he does? He just reaches over and takes hold of my rod, just like that, like I didn't have no say-so about my own rod. When I got through with him," Rusty laughed, "bet he gave up cock for good!"

"Even this beach is a hustling place," Mel commented, as he eyed with rivalry four stud hustlers moving slowly down the length of the

beach, each wearing loud, tight swim-trunks which obviously advertised their sex.

"What place ain't?" Rusty said, eyeing the hustlers maliciously. "Those punks are up to no good, out to clip some queers. I don't go for that. If I sell it, I sell it. If I want to rob, I rob; but I don't mix it. I don't rob queers."

"You're alright," Mel praised, looking at him fondly. "You're not like all these other guys in New Orleans. Some of them give me the creeps just looking at them, like they're always threatening you in some way you can't explain. Like they know what you are and want to get even or want you out of their territory or something."

"Most of them are scared out of their wits," Rusty explained, leaning back on his elbow, his naked shoulder touching Mel's. He did not bother to shift his position. "Jailbait, most of them. Been busted by the fuzz time and time again. That's why they hustle. I've never seen a hustler yet that didn't have a record as long as my rod, or was running from something. That's why they're so ratty looking, they never score, and when they do, it's for peanuts, so they have to rob."

"They don't like you, do they?" Mel asked, wondering why anyone couldn't like Rusty. Though rugged, uncouth at times, quite often profane, he possessed the kindest of hearts and was as honest with himself as the day was long.

Rusty, with a sad gaze, fixed his eyes on Mel. "Who cares? I ain't lost nothing to them mangy punks. They live their lives and I live mine. That's why I don't consider myself a hustler. They run in wolf packs, just as those nellie

queens run like gaggles of geese. But me, Mel babe, I'm a loner. I don't join no kind of gangs nor clubs. I am just myself. What I do, even if it is hustling, I don't consider it is any part of *them*, or their scene. I just don't figure I'm connected to them in any way. Understand?"

Mel nodded. "But *we're* kinda joined up, aren't we?" Mel asked, feeling so secure always in Rusty's presence, as if, in some mutual liaison of their own. Rusty protected him, saw to his well being, always managed to have a few bucks hidden back in case he was broke, always feeding him or taking him to a show when the scene dragged.

Rusty smiled a warm, hearty smile. "Sure, Mel babe," he said, pecking him under the chin with his finger. "We are in a world all our own and I'd pity the poor son of a bitch who tried to come between us."

This was a new revelation to Mel's attentive ears, and he basked in the knowledge. Now that he had lost his parents, his school friends, abandoned all connection with his life in Golden Meadow, Rusty was Mel's only link to normality, if their relation was—in any way—normal, which Mel thought it was. They were friends, Mel needing Rusty as much as Rusty needed him. Thrown together because of the circumstances of their "trade," they naturally found solace in each other, not just as partners to talk shop with, but sharing a strong common dislike for the other boys of their trade. That they had exiled themselves to this life of debauchery was, in itself, a form of compromise, for the exiles of

all times have united, if not in groups then in pairs, the one's ailment being the other's cure.

"How much, Mel, just how much do you care for this Glen fellow?" Rusty asked, which was no surprise to Mel. On many such occasions when they had discussed their relations with scores, Rusty had hinted and had made vague remarks on their attitudes, their reactions to surrendering to such paying men.

"As I said, he irritates me at times," Mel declared, glad that Rusty was concerned, if not actually jealous over a rival. But certainly Rusty was concerned. "I can do without him."

Rusty's eyes were on the motorcycle. His gaze devoured it. "You know, Mel Babe, I was just thinking. You're fed up. I'm fed up. That motor could bring quite a wad of lettuce. We could join up, get us a place together, bring in everything we make, put it all in one pile. At least we'd have a place of our own, Mel. At least we'd have a place to sleep and eat together nights when we didn't score. We wouldn't have to hang out on the streets all the time, just one step ahead of getting busted by the fuzz. We could rest. Sometimes I just can't stand the streets any longer, the queers bugging hell outa me! And there's no privacy down at the bus station, sleeping on those benches, or on the docks or the square. Honest, Mel, sometimes I gotta be by myself, and with the money from the motor we could be on easy street."

A great surge of emotion welled up in Mel's heart. Yet he didn't know why. "You want me to sell the motor?"

Rusty shoved his boot into the damp sand.

"Hell yes! And ditch that Glen fellow. You don't need him. Why, with your looks and physique you could get twice as good! Get you a fancy pad, some flashy duds, go to places where the rich ones hang out. What you say, Mel babe?"

Mel looked at him with stars in his eyes. "Whatever you say, Rusty old boy."

SEPTEMBER

"Well, Mel Babe, how much we got left?" Rusty asked thoughtfully, leaning closer to him across the dining table, as if engaged in a conspiracy, his voice dying with the click of his teeth.

"About fifty, I think," answered Mel, who mentally counted the bills in his wallet. "When I pay for this meal we won't have that."

"We'll make it," Rusty said, with optimism, as he dug into the platter of cheese biscuits. "Something will turn up, always does. So, Mel babe, enjoy yourself. Live high on the hog!"

They were seated in the emerald-green-and-canary-yellow dining room atop the new International Trade Mart Tower, basking in the sumptuous richness, wine-red damask chairs, green marble pillars, crystal chandeliers, a fountain spraying pink water into a circular bowl of dahlias, a soft green carpet, potted palms, walls of glass, bringing the hot blue sky into this gorgeous aerie, which, to them seemed directly under heaven.

On the table before them sat a steaming meal: arroz con pollo (rice with chicken), Louisiana cornbread dressing, avocado salad, marinated vegetables, stuffed bell peppers, fig conserve, almond macaroon soufflé, golden apricot bars, lemon Mardi Gras squares, thick lemon meringue pie, silvery glasses of dark maroon wine. The works!

"Guess you sorry now you sold your motor," Rusty said, his mouth stuffed with cornbread drressing. "With only fifty left?"

Mel shook his head, content that Rusty had derived much pleasure from the sale. There was a moment of silence while they gorged themselves on rich, savory food. He thought of all they had done and seen together since he had sold the motor and splurged the money: he and Rusty shacking up with two girls from Algiers at the Sheraton-Delta hotel, a week-end at the Tamanaca drinking and dancing, a party at the Carriage Inn with more girls (these from Mirabeau Gardens), laying them at the De Ville, swimming parties nightly at the city park, beer sessions with a gang of hustlers on Lake Pontchartrain, a full night sweep of Bourbon Street, taking in all the girlie shows, suppers as often as

they liked at Broussard's, the Bunny Club, setting up all the giddy queens at the My-O-My, a party at a drag queen's apartment, all the nellies going like real girls, the hustlers their he-male escorts, more drinking, more parties, more searching, more desperation, and within it all, a deep frustration to escape, to split!

"I've had the best time in my whole life, Mel," said Rusty with genuine honesty in his voice. And his eyes, steady on Mel's, showed with obvious apprehension, the assessment of that good time against the horror of its ending. That he refused to think about. "I thought I had done it all, but you turned the trick. I never wanted money in my whole life—oh, maybe a buck here and there—until I had the taste of it, and now, for the first time I envy them rich guys you see coming in and out of the Roosevelt and the Monteleone in them fancy suits."

"It was good while it lasted," confirmed Mel, a little crest-fallen that they were scraping the bottom of the gravy barrel. He too realized painfully how Rusty felt and, knowing that he had made Rusty happy for a little while by his own doing, he wished he had more, much more, to give him. He had loved, for some reason, to buy Rusty new clothes, all the cowboy fashions he craved, a bracelet, a gaudy silver ring, a cigarette lighter, and he felt a tinge of self-satisfying pride as he admired him from across the table—the way his new black Stetson (curled to Rusty's own individual taste) sat so recklessly on the back of his head, even in this sumptuous room, the way his black jeans drew taut around his hard, muscular legs, his shiny black boots sunk

an inch deep in the soft green carpet, and his white silk shirt with the black stud, immaculate even in this pure, even light.

Yes, Mel had enjoyed making Rusty happy for as long as he could, though now, with a troubled heart, almost bitterly, he realized their doom was near. Mel had enjoyed every minute of it, even as now, watching Rusty devour his food, glancing up at him at intervals to smile warmly, he lived to the hilt each fleeting moment, even while knowing that their Cinderella ball would soon be over, unless they could score with a rich sugar daddy from one of the higher-class spots they now frequented, before the clock struck twelve and they were forced to return to their dark alleyways, insecurity and ragged apparel.

To Mel's way of thinking, the clock was striking eleven, and in their eleventh hour, if they did not utilize their cunning, their guile, their complete store of masculine charm, they were doomed to that purgatory from which they had so relievedly and happily fled . . .

"Wonder what's happening on the square?" Rusty asked jokingly, supreme in his momentary grandeur, forking up an enormous mouthful of lemon meringue pie, his top lip flaked with white.

Mel jumped. Rusty's words and his voice brought sharply to mind what he had been thinking. As if he were standing at the very gates of hell and gazing into the fiery abyss, he saw the square, remembered the heat, the ghosts moving in the shadows, the sex-hungry eyes probing; he re-lived the weariness of late evenings, the grime, the hunger, the frustration, the

constant privation, the uncertainty, the loneliness.

"Bet Shitface is slumped on a bench rubbing his crotch about now," Rusty surmised, building a mental picture of the anarchic world they had, if but momentarily, escaped, "hoping to grab the first score. And Freddie will be pushing the stuff like mad and the mangy teaheads will be sliding through the park like them mummies we saw once in that Frankenstein movie. Dolly will be in there too, shaking her nympho behind like an alarm clock going off, and them two fruit hustlers, you know who I mean, with their hair all roached up, their belts drawn so tight they look like wasps, and that old whore Mamie, and them vampy high-school girls out wanting to give it away, and always them mangy, flatass drifters with the sores, and them foreign seamen staring all goggle-eyed, like we was fruits or something." He stopped abruptly, shoved a mouthful of almond souffle between his red lips. "Laws! Mel babe, ain't you glad we're living high on the hog? If I had to go back there again I think I'd shit lemon seeds. Just thinking of all them fruity creeps makes the hair rise up on my balls like the pricks on a porcupine!"

Mel looked at him dejectedly. "We may *have* to go back, Rusty. The clock is striking twelve."

Rusty glanced around, wild-eyed. "What clock? I don't hear no clock."

Mel laughed at Rusty's ignorance and loved him for it. "Something in a fairy tale," he explained.

Rusty was still confused. "About some fruit?"

"No, dumb bunny! In a child's storybook."

"Oh. You can't tell me nothing about no fairies, cause I know all there is to know."

"Speaking of fairies," Mel reminded, being tactful and bearing on his shoulders the responsibility of their welfare. "It's high time we put on our hustling duds."

Rusty frowned, then smiled a ready smile. He washed a mouthful of pie down with a big swallow of claret. "Don't *ever* say hustler. That ain't nice. Babe. We're in the big time now, Mel, in the high cotton."

Mel was curious. "What do we call ourselves then?"

"*Joyboys!*" Rusty giggled. "That's what them rich scores call boys they like to swing on. We've got to be more tactful, not rub our crotch like we did in the Square. If you're too obvious, they'll think we're hustlers, which we are, but they don't like to know that or to speak it out loud; it kinda degrades their ego or something to that effect. These rich sons of bitches don't take too hot to paying for a hustler. They pay, of course, and plenty! But they like to have you think they're just taking you out or something—which amounts to the same shit. Keep your cool, man, and play it loose. With you in them fancy duds you're sportin', that Tattersall boating jacket, or whatever you call it, them dacron slacks, and that baby-blue mesh shirt, you're a winner, Babe. They gonna go for you, rod, balls and all!"

Finishing their meal, they went up to the Plimsoll Club, which topped the Trade Mart Tower. Here, in their eleventh hour, they hoped

to score—not just anyone—but with someone who had influence, money.

At the sandalwood-colored leather bar they selected a place near the plate glass walls so that they could view the city and ordered two gin rickeys. With an air of pretended indifference, they viewed the plush interior: secretly marveled at the brass-studded bar done completely in underpadded leather, stools with hard leather backs, the tapestry hanging behind the bar itself, the persimmon-colored carpet, the pickle-green chairs, also of shiny leather, and the Arabian camp tables.

"The very end," Rusty gloated, sipping his drink, at the same time giving the place the eye. "I feel like a bull in a china shop in this place." He nudged Mel with an elbow.

"That's what you are," Mel declared, giving him a ready smile.

"Look at all them sex-starved eyes on us," Rusty said, beaming. "We're about as safe in here as a polled Angus going through a meat packing plant."

"And about as scared," remarked Mel with a nervous tremor to his voice. "Maybe we could do better in the square, our own stomping grounds." He shuddered at the thought while his curious eyes picked out every face down the length of the bar. "Everyone looks like a detective to me."

"*They* fuck too," Rusty reminded him. "Same as anybody else."

"Fuck you and then bust you," Mel whispered, pretending a familiarity with detectives he didn't have. All he had really seen was a cop now and then on his daily rounds through the

square, the vice-squads on infrequent raids along Bourbon, or a break-up at some party making it too rowdy. Vagrants were no longer picked up and jailed, due to the new civil-rights law, and hustlers and whores manuevered freely without incident unless they disturbed the peace, or made obvious overtures to clients.

Rusty nudged him again. "See that guy over there in the grey silky suit? He's got hot pants for you. Just sit loose, babe! Just sit loose!"

Mel frowned, for some reason he could not name, some inner, instant surge of his emotions, something similar to heartbreak or revolting despair, when he became aware of Rusty's hope to sell him off to a prospective score. It was like, Mel thought strangely, like Rusty selling his girl or his lover. No, not like that exactly, but similar, akin in some cruel, disruptive way to being clipped by a friend, a brother.

Rusty advised, his voice harsh, belligerent: "Wink at the son of a bitch!"

Mel obliged him. With a steady gaze in his eyes, locking on the man in the grey suit, he winked a slow, deliberate wink.

It worked!

The man picked up his drink, came readily up to them. His face was gashed with a smile, his sound, even teeth glittering in the clean hot light.

"Well!" the man said, letting out a blissful sigh. "If it isn't the eagle and the dove, or, should I say the centaur and the unicorn?"

Rusty gave him a cock-eyed gaze, lifted his hat in salute, then set it over his right eye, his favorite position, for it lent him the cock-of-the-

walk stance he loved, the self-image on which he doted.

"Come again, Mister!"

"The waifs of a nostalgic jocund-ass," the man said, laughing so loudly everyone at the bar turned and stared. "Allow me to introduce myself." He bowed slightly, too slightly.

"Be our guest," Mel spoke up, a little nervous.

"My name is Leland Freret, of the little theatre group here in our fair, sun-drenched Crescent City. Allow me to buy you young gentlemen a drink." He motioned for the waiter.

He ordered two gin rickeys and a Scarlet O'Hara for himself. When the waiter returned with them, he lifted his to mustached lips and sipped sparingly.

"A lady's drink," he explained, grinning foolishly. "You understand, gentlemen." He lifted an eyebrow, his silvery fish-eyes trapping and reflecting the light. "But mercy! You don't expect ME . . ." he put a hand to his heart, "to drink a gin rickey do you? That would be perversion indeed!"

Rusty and Mel tried to laugh, but failed miserably, not grasping the meaning. He was playing with words, and neither of the boys, especially not Rusty, were accustomed to playing games with scores. Talk was unnecessary, out there in the square, where a look, a tilt of the head, a lifted eyebrow did the trick.

But then, surprisingly to them both, the man called Leland dropped his facade, his slight smile, and gazed wantonly into Mel's upturned eyes.

"To my apartment? Or yours?"

There was a pregnant silence for a moment.

Then: "To mine," Mel said at last, obediently remembering the advice Rusty had given him when they had rented their new apartment together; that if a score noticed how well they were set up he would automatically feel obligated to pay more.

Mel *had* selected a nice place for the pair to set up partnership in trade—a lush and modernistic hotel on Chartres Street called *Le Richelieu*. It was swank to say the least, compared to their previous living conditions, boasting air-conditioning, pool, bar, and room service if desired, which Rusty and Mel didn't. It was too risky. Though they never slept there at the same time, one scoring while the other was being scored, they did consider it home, their only home, and they were proud of it.

Of course, Mel would never horn in on one of Rusty's scores, bowing out with some plausible excuse when Rusty brought a score in; and this also held true with Rusty. For some personal reason of their own, neither would watch or even remain in the apartment while the other one was in the course of scoring. But when Leland Freret asked the price and Rusty told him a hundred each, it was only natural for Leland to assume it was to be a threesome.

"Like shit it is!" Rusty cried, forgetting his new elevated station. His eyes, hot and molten with anger, looked at Mel as Mel's burned back at his. "I'll take a stroll in the square," Rusty concluded, getting up from the leather hassock and making it to the glass-paneled door.

* * *

Later, at *Le Richelieu*, Mel stood naked by the canary yellow silk bed, awaiting his cue to climb into bed with his score, a score he'd had no least desire for. Leland gave him a careful look, devouring his young body with his hotly avid eyes, and said outright:

"You're perfect! Want to make some extra money? I know this female impersonator out on Lakeshore drive, name is Japanelle, a young boy from the Orient. He owns and operates the Golden Lantern Club. He's been searching for a boy about your build to dance with him in one of his numbers, lost his other partner, some Jap kid who got killed in the Circus of the Flowers. Why don't you come along when we're through? I'll introduce you!"

OCTOBER

Mel, dressed only in a sequined loin sling, with vari-colored confetti sprinkled in his sandy hair, his eyes Cleopatra-painted, flexed his hard muscles, moved cat-like on the little circular stage bathed in crimson hues, which emphasized the intense vigor of his lithe body, his very obvious masculinity.

Opposite to him danced Japanelle, the boy star sensation imported from Tokyo as a female impersonator. Tiny, doll-like, his raven black hair coiffed in a popular French cut with curls at his ears and bangs in front, shimmering with silvery confetti, his all-but-nude body luminous white, the pronounced slant of his eyes magnified with shiny black paint, he danced the exciting sabre Dance, a choreography enhanced by the thunder of drums, of cymbal and tsuzumi and chanting Joruri.

The perfect image of male and female in a contrived aura of grace and beauty was the effect Japanelle sought, scoring obvious subterfuge, as encountered in so many female impersonations, the garish and tasteless trappings which American female impersonators prefer. Dancing in the strong brown arms of Mel Marcel, Japanelle was most natural. The custume he wore was of no significance. He could have worn male attire and still those in the packed audience would have considered him the true replica of woman, even with advanced knowledge that the exotic person they watched moving in and out of the purple shadow of Mel was no real woman.

Perhaps Japanelle was *more* than a real woman.

Real women take their sex for granted, while Japanelle worked at his. The sheer mystery of woman, the menacing guile of woman, the futile fragility of woman, all counterbalanced by the roaring crescendo of sounds, the multi-colored spotlights which picked out each sensuous quality, became magnified and intensified by the hard, masculine body of Mel. His darkness brought out Japanelle's frosty whitness. His hardness brought out the softness. His dominating personality in form and movement overshadowing, as it should, the futile brittleness of the female role Japanelle played to unison to his, one uppermost then the other, until, as the music picked up a more fantastic and flaming key, they merged, two bodies without idenity, both sexual harmonies telling its own story, a sex poem in the curving of thighs, the swaying of hips, the snake-like movement of arms, the

capped, smoldering erupting of some defensive anonymously poignant quality the audience thought they saw but didn't.

Their bodies turned into a magician's trick, frosted by the moving lights, bodies of the night-world, as if veiled by mesh, revealing but never disclosing, saying so much, yet so little. Two semi-nude bodies that might have been conjured by narcotics, marijuana, the oozing nightmare of the teaheads, the fancies they beheld in their wildest and most fantastic dreams, bodies that talked of lust, shouted it, echoed the limbo of ecstasy, lulling and magnifying and intensifying the principle of male and female, symbolized by male and male.

And when they were through, their shadowy forms enshrouded with cloud-like vapors of purple and emerald gauze, arms and thighs shimmering to herald eruptive yells, cat-calls from the drunken audience, they slid into the shadows.

"You were sensyu" (athlete) "very sensyu," Japanelle said, out of breath, as they moved cat-like through the dark corridor, where fanciful dragons ran wild on frothy white screens, and through pale luminous rice paper doors to his private living quarters. "Taido!" (the way of the body) "Taido means everything in this kind of dance. You, Mel Marcel, so masculine, as you Americans say, make me look more feminine, no?"

"Yes," Mel said, laughing, breathing heavily, for he too was exhausted after their performance. He looked down at the upturned face so near his, a face filled with the loveliness of the female so

that he was momentarily confused, as he had been confused with this exotic creature since that night almost a month ago when Leland Freret first introduced them. There was something about this being, something neither male nor female but partaking of both, which thrilled and awed him. Not that he liked the fruity queens who frequented places like the Finale and Lafitte's In Exile, Nellie's and the My-O-My. But this boy, this oriental doll intrigued him in a classic sense (rather than the sensuous); he wanted him, caught himself at times, during the long hours rehearsing their dance, actually flirting with him, paying him court, just as he had teased and played jokes on the girls in his high school class.

During his brief acquaintance with Japanelle, Mel did not regard him as a queer, not as he regarded and loathed boys like Miss Satin and Miss Lace swishing in the square, trying to be like real girls in front of the hustling studs. The day Leland Freret introduced them Japanelle was in rehearsal costume, drag, looking very much like the Dragon Lady in the comic strips. Exotic, ethereal, exquisite, Japanelle had gone a step further indeed in his subtle female role, more glamorous than most real females. He had combined his naturally beautiful body with his dancing skill and his ability to dress, and had come up with an astounding resemblance of the real thing.

No man, Mel concluded, as he gazed with wonder on this strange creature with the almond shaped eyes, the black Gina Lollobrigida bob, the luminous complexion, could help but sexual-

ly desire him (with the exception perhaps of Rusty).

"The more I know you, the more I become confused," Mel said to him, alone with him now for the first time since they had met. "I forget you've got a prick and a pair of balls the same as me. It's hard to accept the fact that you're not a real girl."

With his slanted almond eyes smiling, his chin lifted demurely, Japanelle said: "Does that disappoint you, Mel? That I'm not a real girl?"

"I don't know," Mel answered. And he wasn't certain. Six months ago he would have been certain, sure that he wanted him to be a girl, never a boy. Now, this inner confusion only made Japanelle more desirable, more irresistible. "How do Japanese men look upon you?"

"Not henna" (queer) "as you think of me here in America," he answered. "In Tokyo it is the artistry of the transformation that counts. True talent lies there, not in the results of the transformation as the naked eyes see it. You must have noticed many times, Mel, when we practiced, that I was not wearing female attire. Did you consider me female then?"

Mel scratched his head. "Yes, I think I did. I—I don't know really. I think—I think I looked at you like something neither boy nor girl. Like in a movie I saw once about twins, a boy and a girl, and I couldn't tell one from the other. Like I was seeing two boys one time then two girls. But I've often wondered about you, Japanelle, and I just can't help it: *are* you queer? Do you love boys instead of girls?"

Japanelle laughed softly. He went to an elon-

gated mirror, unclasped the choker at his neck, studied his lovely complexion.

"In my mind's eye, Mel, I *am* a real female. The body is nothing. The mind is everything. The mind controls the physical form as my mind controls my physical action. And the fact that I have a prick and a pair of balls, as you phrased it, does not make me a man in one sense of the word. My thoughts, my desires, my inner self as to motive and function are purely female, while my physical self must act like a male, getting an erection, shaving, standing to urinate. I do these things voluntarily, with an incompleteness of my true nature. To love girls, even though my physical body is visibly male, would be to betray my nature. If I loved a girl, being mentally a girl, this would make me a Lesbian. If I loved no one at all, I would be a transvestite."

Mel studied him for a brief moment, puzzled that he so desired this person, that he wanted to have sexual intercourse with him and puzzled how he had allowed his emotions free rein in this old world of sexual inversion, of perverted carnality. What he did on the streets with men, scores who paid for his body, he did not consider as queer. But this odd sensation rearing to passionate longing within him, stirring this strange tumult in his young loins was, with a cowing of his conscience, archaic and a violation of his manhood. He was wanting this strange, beautiful oriental boy, this dancer, and he asked, almost with a hint of self-protection in his voice: "You are queer then? Like other female impersonators?"

Japanelle was silent for a moment, as if, in

answering the truth he might lose rather than gain. Finally he whispered: "For you, Mel Marcel." His low voice died in a sing song chant. "I have thought about it." He lifted his heavily painted eyes, found Mel's glittering, defensive. "I have thought about how it would be, me with you, in your arms, you loving me. Like long time ago with Tara Akira."

Mel looked down at him, swallowed hard, thinking how much he suddenly wanted him, and how the shadow of this Tara Akira swept between them, menacing, anonymous, and it frightened him a little.

"I have heard Leland speak of him," he said, trying to make conversation, at the same time longing with a furious longing to learn what they had been to each other. "Leland said something about him being in a circus."

Japanelle began to fuss over a little charcoal burner, a hibachi, putting on the tea kettle and motioning for Mel to sit opposite him on the straw mats (tatami) which like everything in the room, were genuinely Japanese. Mel obeyed, seating himself on the mat and crossing his shapely legs.

"Tara Akira worked in the Circus of the Flowers," Japanelle began, "near the amusement park. It is no longer there. Hurricane Hilda. floored it like the kome ta' in the driving rain. But Tara was an aerialist, or flyboy as he was called. He worked with a black panther, a very dangerous act, one of the most terrifying in all the whole world. I watch him many times, up high on the wires, like beautiful butterfly on festival day of the Kojo Matsuri. I designed

costume for him, very much like yours, Mel, so to show off fine body against the lights." He paused, lifted the steaming kettle, poured out two cups of hot water into glistening cups on which were embossed dragons in gray and amber. He stirred in green tea leaves then handed a cup to Mel. "One night during storm he was killed on high wire. Wind frighten panther, lights go out. The panther tear him to ribbons."

Mel looked at Japanelle across the little burner. Tears were forming on his lower eyelids and his chin began to tremble.

"Did you love him?" Mel asked, wondering, with an instinctive futility, why he was allowing his emotions to become involved. He was a hustler, singling out sex partners only for money, not for the love. Why should he care who Japanelle had loved?

"Yes, I loved him very much," was Japanelle's reply, a reply that, oddly enough, stung Mel's tortured mind. "Not 'cause he was Japanese, but 'cause he had such a beautiful body. No one in all the whole world had body like Tara Akira. Except maybe you, Mel Marcel. That is why, that is why I asked you to be my partner. Your body, so bronze, so hard, resemble his. Do you mind, Mel?"

Mel shook his head. "No. No I don't mind." Then he added without subterfuge. "I'm glad, Japanelle, glad you wanted me to dance with you."

"Dancing with you night after night take sadness from my heart because Tara die."

Mel looked down at his cup, studied the tea

leaves which made fanciful patters. "Do you want me to love you, Japanelle? Like Tara?"

Japenelle breathed heavily. "I've thought about it, Mel. The wonder of it, the beauty of it." He studied the leaves in his own cup, as if, through some dim border-world of visibility he could read his future. "At first, at first when he die I say: Japanelle never have lover again! Never! I work hard. I dance hard. Then, I find he have other lover, a Japanese man who is aerialist like himself. It broke my heart." He lifted his shadowy eyes, fixed them on Mel. "You can mend heart again, Mel Marcel. You can put the pieces back together again, broken places then good as new. I trust you, Mel. I trust you, and I need to trust someone—need to trust someone very bad—please—please!"

The starving eyes that locked and held onto Mel's made every tendon in his body shudder and, without realizing what he was doing, he rose to his feet, pulled Japanelle close and swept him into his arms.

"Hold me! Hold me!" cried Japanelle piteously, sinking his face in Mel's naked chest. "Make me forget Tara Akira! Make me forget Tara Akira forever. Forever!"

Taking Japanelle's chin in his hand, Mel lifted his face, kissed him tenderly at first, then passionately. They became smothered in each other's embrace, clinging desperately in the dim light, as surely female and male as when they had danced as partners on the crimson-lit stage.

Stripped now of all reasoning, eager to carry out to the full his stored passion for this creature who had beguiled him, who had flaunted a

fluorescent appeal before his eruptive power, Mel began to unfasten the clasps to Japanelle's thin mesh-like garments. His hands, like messengers from his tortured brain, wandered over the half-nude body warm against his, feeling dreamy curves and contours, glorying in the satin skin, the touch of Japanelle's delicate body, never once remembering that the body he held so endearingly was male not female. But as he was unfastening the clasp to his crotch sling, the white screen shuffled back and he looked up to see Rusty.

There was fury and threat in Rusty's blazing eyes. A moment more and he had jerked Mel from Japanelle's embrace.

"You goin' crazy or something?" Rusty growled, grabbing Mel by the wrist and dragging him to the sliding screen. "You ain't fuckin' none of these sissy fruits! Understand?"

Silently Mel obeyed, leaving a puzzled Japanelle standing in the middle of the room, surrounded by the artifacts of old, dead Japan, a manufactured dream of a world no more.

Outside, the enormous white lantern hung from low eaves of the wide gallery, making dim shadows along the patterned screens and on the faces of Rusty and Mel. They slowed their pace, Rusty let go of Mel's arm, and they made their way slowly across the dark sandy garden to the street.

"Don't you know that Leland Freret is getting suspicious of you and that Japanese fruit?" Rusty barked, pointing back with his thumb.

"I don't care," Mel said, out of breath, his wild passion now ebbed to a trapped frustration.

"He'll be cutting you off!" Rusty reminded him sharply. "You want to wind up getting kicked out of that swank apartment? All that food, them clothes, us having a place to sleep and shower? Man where's your mind, flew the coop or something?"

Mel paused in his tracks, gave Rusty a stern look. "Is that why you came way out here? Afraid we'd lose Leland's handouts?"

Rusty laughed, slipping his Stetson to the back of his head. "I was just minding the store, Mel babe, just minding the store. Why?" His sharp gaze raked across Mel's face.

Mel's hungry eyes gnawed into Rusty's. "Thought for a moment it was for me."

"Well," Rusty stammered, thrusting his hands in his back pockets, "I don't take to you laying with a fruit like that. If you do, you'll be gobbling them yourself before long." He smiled a rakish smile, his eyes glinting. He turned his head, looked back at the Golden Lantern. "Can't say I blame you in a way, babe. That's the purtiest fruit I ever laid my Texas eyes on. Wouldn't mind putting the rod to that myself."

NOVEMBER

"I hate to say this, Rusty," Mel said, as they turned off Downman Road onto Southline Drive, swerving the tomato-red Jaguar to the left so abruptly the tires screamed. "But Leland don't like you riding around in his car."

Mel was a little intoxicated, he and Rusty had been mixing their drinks all morning at the *Peppermint Tent* on Dahlia Walk. He had enough to fortify his courage and started to tell Rusty off about accompanying him everywhere in Leland's shiny new sports car. Actually, Mel wanted him along but, catering to Leland's jealous whims, he felt he should do as Leland said if he wished to continue getting hand-outs from him. Leland had not liked Rusty from the very first and had complained constantly.

Rusty slid his hat over his eyes and sank further into the bucket seat. "What else don't that Leland fruit like?" he asked, feeling a little bitter at being deprived of the privileges Mel had without having to hustle.

"Well, you know how scores are," Mel said, not wanting to hurt Rusty's feelings. After all, Rusty was the only friend he had, his only real companion, and he had no wish to lose him for the sake of a lousy rich score who thought he should have anything he wanted as often as he wanted, regardless of the feelings or sacrifices of others.

"No, can't say I do," Rusty answered, peering at him from the shadow of his hat brim. "I don't up and live with a guy like you do, Mel babe, like I was hitched to him or something. Like bein' joined in church."

"You know why I put up with Leland," Mel said, irritated. "It's for you as much as for me. Hell, I don't like the snooty bastard no more than you do. But how do you think I get all our spending money, this car anytime I want it?"

Rusty laughed bitterly. "So you got your hooks in him, haven't you? So why worry? It's his risk, not ourn. If he didn't have it so bad with your tail he wouldn't be taking all these risks and spending all that lettuce on you, now would he?"

"I reckon not," Mel replied, trying to listen to Rusty and drive at the same time. He slowed up at the Navigation Canal, drove slowly over the little bridge then turned right on Lakeshore Drive. "I want you with me. You know that. But I want to keep raking in his dough. Have you

forgotten our hard times in the square?" Rusty shook his head. "Well," Mel went on, "I haven't forgotten. Leland's been damn nice to me."

"Yeah! He introduced you to that sissy Japanelle!"

"You know damn well what I mean!"

"Okay! Okay!" Rusty grunted. "I know what you mean. He gives you money and clothes and he takes you to Broussard's for supper and to shows and to the little theater to see him spout off his mouth on the stage and to the races and lets you bet on the horses and ride on the President and take tours to all the stuck-up places, while little ole me sits on my calloused ass in the square until he gets through with you." He slapped Mel playfully on the thigh. "I know the whole shittin' story. While you and him are out painting the town red I swap spit with one of the chicks until you get back or either drop my load to some lousy old man who can afford to shell out for his kicks." He stopped talking, put his hands behind his head, and slid still further into the seat, his long legs spread, brushing Mel's. "Now, Mel babe, it's done come to this. You and him are ashamed of me, hate like hell to see me in the car with all your fine and dandy get ups. I'm on to the shit!"

"That's a goddamned lie!" Mel spat furiously. He took out his wrath against Rusty and his unfair attitude by pressing his foot further on the accelerator. The car shot with squealing tires around the loop toward the lighthouse and Pontchartrain Beach. It went between the two, down the long sandy strip past the Model Aircraft Airport, the Naval Reserve Air Training Base

where Rusty gave a cat whistle at all the sailors in immaculate white idling their time out on the spacious grounds, and circled Lake Terrace Drive.

"Hit a sore spot?" Rusty asked, sobering a little, and he raised up in the seat.

Mel shot him a dirty glance, aware of having had too much to drink, and pressed harder on the gas. "Just trying to make it light on us both," Mel said. Rusty was making it difficult for him, and he wanted both Leland's money and Rusty's companionship. "All we got to do is obey a few little rules, then we both get what we want."

"Ah, Mel, quit your griping!" said Rusty commandingly. "That fruit lover of yours is sore cause he can't swing on my rod and yours both for the same lousy price."

"He's not my lover!"

"Same thing, Mel boy. Love is what comes outta the head of your rod. The more comes out the more you love the guy, he thinks.

"Leland's not like that. Honest."

"Oh ho, ho, so he's different!" Rusty laughed hoarsely, his merriment spiced with defensive subterfuge. "If they like to suck your rod then all them son of a bitches can be shoved down the same slot like a nickel in a jukebox. I could take him away from you, Mel, if I wanted to, be driving this chicken crate instead of you. If I was that rotten kind, which I ain't."

Mel glared at him, his dazed brain clearing. "So that's it! You want him too!"

"Shit!" Rusty cried, giving him a disgusted look. "Has he sucked out your brain, too, Man?"

"I don't give a damn about him, and you know it!" Mel said, gripping the steering wheel with hands of steel. A car whizzed past. Mel, his thoughts erupting, swerved too far to the right. The Jaguar skidded off the sea-shell pavement into the soft sand. Tires squealed, rubber burned and they were back on the highway. Mel didn't drop a single word. "I can't understand why you got so rawled cause I said he didn't like you in his car. You can find a score and you know it. Like before you met me."

Rusty turned his gaze from Mel, stared at the shimmering waves on Lake Pontchartrain. "Maybe I don't like that lousy cocksucker taking up your time," he whispered finally, still not glancing in Mel's direction.

Mel swallowed hard as a lump rose to his throat. Primed on drink, the alcohol making him sensuously potent, his heart gladdened that Rusty was concerned, that he actually missed him when he was not around, that he missed him very much indeed if he made the effort to put such emotional salaciousness into words.

"I do it for us," Mel said quickly before Rusty's mood vanished and he would turn cold on him. "Everything I do is for us, for you and me. I wouldn't even go with this Leland Freret if he didn't give me enough money to spend on both of us."

Rusty hurled at him a defensive glance, a momentary glint, a sparkle of quicksilver, then turned quickly away. "It gripes the shit out of me, Mel, just sitting in that creepy park wondering what you and him are doing." He paused, as if he had declared too much and, with caution,

changed the subject. "Besides, I don't like him bossing us. No queer son of a bitch is going to tell me what to do, or you either, long as there's breath in my body." He shot a sidelong glance out of the car, waved his hand like he was driving cattle. "Slow down, man! Shit! Stop!"

Mel stepped on the brake as sea-shell flew. "What the hell?"

"I want a drink."

Rusty pointed to a delapidated shack sitting in a field of sand a few yards from the highway. Its front gallery was draped with fish netting from which enormous glass floats dangled. The place was called the Conch and its interior, once they were seated within, looked no better than the outside.

They bought a rum and cola each, and when they had drunk those they ordered two gin and tonics.

"Let's ride over to City Park," Rusty suggested, eyeing Mel with glazed, bloodshot eyes. His Stetson was on askew, and he had a don't-care rakish look about him, his damp hair in loose tangles over his eyes, his face a little pale and wan from too many drinks.

"We're suposed to go to the Yacht Club to pick up Leland," Mel said, slowly, reluctantly, for he did not want to get Rusty's temper flaring up again.

"That's right, always taking care of that motherfucker first," spat Rusty, but with a cowed expression, a hurt look that went to the depths of Mel's heart.

"He's been good enough to let us have the car, at . . ."

"Us?" Rusty interrupted, downing his drink and slamming the glass on the rough wooden table. "Where did you get that us? You know you intend putting me out somewhere so you and that stuck up ass can drive off to some shady spot while I bake in this rotten heat."

Mel suggested politely: "You could go to the amusement park, or a show perhaps. I'll let you have the money."

Rusty pouted, his lower lip projecting an inch. "Sex money!"

Mel glared at him dry eyed. "How in the hell else do you think I get it?"

Rusty shrugged. "Mel, Mel babe. Let's stand the fucker up! He don't mind, long as you're driving that lousy crate. Thinks you're king. You can get by with anything with that dumb old man, and you know it."

Mel shook his head. He ordered two more drinks, he was really splurging, a manhattan and a planter's punch. "I don't know, Rusty. I just don't know. Don't think I should."

"Hell, babe! You ain't no five-year-old, and he ain't no wet nurse. He knows you're a man, with a prick that gets hard once in a while for girls, knew that the first time he laid his red hot eyes on you. He knew you wasn't no sissy fruit, like he knew I wasn't, that we were both he-man studs out to screw a couple of chicks. Listen, Man, there's some slick quail in City Park. They go out there waiting to be picked up by all them breed stud sailors and them ignorant punks from Delgado Trade School. They're itching for it Man! Won't take us long, pick up a couple, ride them out to the fairgrounds, put it to 'em in one

of them vacant buildings. Then we'll ride on back, pick up your sugar daddy like nothing happened." He leaned drunkenly on the table, grabbed Mel's hand persistently. "That old goat won't ever know the difference. How's he gonna know, huh? Tell me. Now how's he gonna know if you've come or not?"

Mel shook his head. "He won't, I reckon," he said sheepishly, hanging his head. He lifted his drink courageously, swallowed it down. The fire swept through him like a fluorescent flame. Through a sudden haze, he saw Rusty bending close to him, saw the tantalizing glitter in his roving eyes, the sternness about his hard-set features, his lower lip wet from his drink and, momentarily high, he neither saw nor felt anything else. There was nothing but Rusty's nearness, the sound of his lovable voice, begging, imploring.

He bolted the remainder of his drink. With a wavering smile he answered Rusty's plea. They wobbled out to the car.

With a roar, spinning shell, gravel, and loose sand, they sped down Lakeshore Drive, passed the little inlet creek which helped empty Pontchartrain Lake into the Gulf of Mexico, on recklessly. The sun was glaring hotly, shimmering in its autumn heat, and a terrible dancing of liquid waves lifted the highway ahead of them into an awesome mirage. Mel blinked, gripped the wheel.

"That sugar daddy of yours reminds me of a fruit I once knew." Rusty continued to make conversation, as Mel, high now to the point of genuine intoxication, nodded attentively, but desperately fought to keep his thoughts on driving,

his eyes on the road, as car after car went by them in rapid succession like flaming demons.

"He was always scared, like Leland Freret, figured everybody was out to get him, especially any stud he had scored with. Never would let them in his pad after he had had them once, wouldn't let them have his car, clothes, nothing. A real tight wad, a gone loser, Man! Him and some other scary queens set them up a big apartment in the quarter. All of them lived together. Babe, it was like the old ladies' home! When the doorbell rang they would give signals, tapping on the walls to another queen, or beating on the floor with their foot, or high heels probably, to warn them of the advancing enemy. Us, Babe, hustlers like us." He jammed a thumb into his chest, let out a drunken chuckle. "Imagine them queens afraid of us! Us who makes our living off them silly motherfuckers! And lights, Man! They kept the place lit up at night like it was a circus!"

"Can't blame them much," Mel managed to say, as he swerved the Jaguar around, passing a Mayflower moving van. They came so close that sweat popped out like pearls on his forehead. "Look what Shitface did to one of them about two months ago, kicked his door in, went off with his radio, TV, luggage, some clothes. That's what makes it tough on us hustlers, guys like Shitface and Pablo and that skinny ass Tommy Gail."

Rusty leaned on Mel's shoulder, his Stetson falling off between the seats. "The way you keep talking, you'll be siding up with them fuckers."

"I wasn't siding up," Mel denied, squinting at the sun ahead. He could see the wall extending

around the City Yacht Harbor, a long gray line above the shimmering blue. Above the wall rose a curtain of canvas sails, blinding white. A flashing blanket of fire raked across his vision. His head reeled. He couldn't even make out the bulk of cars racing in his direction.

"You'll be letting them screw you next!" Rusty yelled, grabbing him playfully in the crotch, "Won't you, babe?"

In a blind world of white, Mel suddenly lost his bearings. He screamed for Rusty to behave, but his warning came too late. The car skidded to one side of the highway, struck the seawall, rumbled down the enormous concrete steps, splashed into the Lake.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" Rusty cried drunkenly, but sobered now amazingly by the sudden jolt, the jarring of his every bone and nerve hurling his mind back to reality. "Mel, babe! Are you hurt? Baby, are you hurt?"

Mel pulled himself up from the steering wheel where his body had slumped. Every nerve in his system trembled. Suddenly he was sick inside. He was going to vomit. The glare still burned at his eyes, stabbed like hot claws. "I don't know," he cried helplessly. He leaned and slumped weakly, exhausted, into Rusty's lap.

"Babe! Babe!" Rusty tried to console him, gathering his face into his strong bronze arms. Then he began to sob drunkenly, his eyes strangely white, his complexion turned to the sallow hue of wax. "I love you, Mel. Love you!"

Crowds gathered, came over the seawall like water. There were screams and yells, women's trembling voices, squealing children. Men in pale

blue and red uniforms, shades, shimmering buttons, pistols strapped to thighs, approached calmly, silently, cautiously.

Rusty nudged Mel protectively. He lifted his tear-stained face to the clamorous mob. Then he looked at the car, the hood, the fenders, the lights. He went sick at the sight, strangely pale and sick, and all he could mutter was: "Rusty! We've wrecked Leland's car! We've wrecked Leland's car!"

DECEMBER

"I can't go on with you like this," said Leland Freret to Mel as they sat out on the little terrace overlooking Conti Street. "You're impossible. Back when you wrecked my Jaguar, I tried not to say anything. Bailed both you and that cheap imitation of a cowboy out of jail, paid your fine for reckless driving, bought another car for you to drive while the Jaguar was being fixed, but this last bit of charading is just too much."

Mel couldn't answer or even manage with his jumbled brain to arrange two words into a sentence. He just sat there with his head in his hands, hoping Leland wasn't so fed up with him he'd give him up. For if he did, he would lose everything, the new apartment he had leased, his new clothes, money. Most of all plenty of money for him and Rusty to blow.

"I'm sorry," he said at last, not looking up, not daring to fix his sad eyes on those of Leland, knowing full well the angry glare he would receive. "It won't happen again. Ever. I promise."

"I wish to God I could believe that, could rely on what you say, but it's hard as hell to believe you any more. Leland ran his hand through his silvery white hair nervously and paced the floor of the terrace covered with maroon Valencia tile. From the glass-topped table he picked up his cigarettes, knocked one from the pack with the back of his thumb, lit it with trembling fingers and sat down in the iron lace chair. His body was poised, rigid, and his eyes staring at Mel's bowed head were like orbs of ice. He glared at him thus for an instant, then his gaze softened, scanned Mel's body clad only in white fig-leaf trunks. Leaning forward, he placed his elbow on the chair rest, resting his head in his long open palm, almost in the attitude of one meditating.

They were both silent. The only sounds were those drifting up from Conti Street in the heart of the Quarter and the TV left on carelessly in the spacious, elaborate living room. They were on the fourth floor of the Prince Conti, Leland's permanent dwelling, a sumptuous palace whose

decor reflected the antique mellowness of the French Quarter, heavy Chippendale chairs, Sheraton beds, Italian altar candlesticks on the mahogany lowboy, blue ash floors, Duncan Phyfe dining ensemble, walnut secretary, French fruitwood chests, every room littered with bronze, jade, and ebony statuary.

"You realize how much I love you," Leland finally said, in a low whisper. "How much I really care."

"Yes. I know," Mel answered directly, glancing up then to see him there bent, disheveled, pale from worry and strain, and suddenly he was deeply ashamed, ashamed that he always acted on Rusty's inclinations and not his own. He had always had a clear, sober mind, always had reacted according to his simple country rearing, cool, collected, taking on responsibilities with energy and pliability. But since he had known Rusty, had relied on his friendship so much, had become weakened by Rusty's dynamic personality, he simply could not think any more. He usually did whatever Rusty wanted, as he might have obeyed his father or his coach in high school or the pastor, without question, resentment, or argument.

"I liked you the first moment I laid eyes on you at the Trade Mart Tower," Leland went on sadly. "Remember?" He looked up and their eyes met squarely, locked, held like magnets.

"I won't ever forget," was Mel's reply.

"You seemed different, oh so different from all these other punks who prowl these filthy streets with their palms up. Oh, I knew that parody of Buck Jones you cater to wasn't any different.

He's just like all that other bunch. I could spot him right off. Like the devil's bit in a hothouse of orchids. Just like that dirty brat they call Shitface, and Duke whom I've had but wish I hadn't. God! I must have been drunk that night! And that boy who always wears an army shirt with levis. What's his name?"

"Bucco," Mel answered readily, without having to think.

"I knew you were an educated boy, Mel. I could see that you had been reared properly, that you knew right from wrong, that at last I had found someone I could put faith in, someone I could admire and love and spoil and pet. And I needed that, picking up those uncouth hustlers nightly, all of them tough trade."

"But I wanted you to pet and spoil me," Mel cried, remembering with a grateful heart all the wonderful things this man had done for him. "To love me," he said lastly, drowning his voice in emotion.

Leland looked at him for a moment, not knowing whether to believe him or to consider, as he had considered lately, that this bit of guile was just one more foolish, childish lie added to all the others. But there was a faint light in his tear-rimmed eyes at what Mel had said, and he leaned foreward in his chair, as if drawn to Mel's body by his voice, his timely words.

"I suppose you did," Leland said lightly, trying to smile. But then, as if remembering some hurt, some remnant of pride, his face resumed its rigid mask, and he slipped back into his chair.

"I never wanted to do—er—any of those things I did," Mel declared contritely, his gaze fixed ea-

gerly and pleadingly on Leland. "Ain't nobody ever been as good to me as you have, not even Papa. But when Rusty suggests things it all looks okay at the time, and I go ahead and do it before I think, before I remember your rules."

"Mel! Mel!" Leland implored, leaning again in his chair. "I don't want you, I *never* wanted you to think you had to live and go by rules just because I made them. I wanted you to behave and live decently with me, to share what I have, to make me happy by letting me know that I made you happy. If you were a punk like that levied Rusty or that Pablo I wouldn't expect any more from you. I would expect you to go out and wreck my car, drink, screw these New Orleans broads, steal, beg, fleece me out of every dime I've got to my name. And I couldn't blame anybody but myself if you did all these things. But because you were you, I put my complete trust in you. I was shocked and surprised when you disappointed me like you did. And hurt, badly hurt, Mel," he said very lovingly. "You don't know how many dreadful times. You don't know, and perhaps never will, the many, many lonely hours I have lain awake at night waiting for you to return, to hear your key in the lock. How many times have I waited?"

Mel dropped his eyes.

"Hundreds! Literally hundreds! How many times have I given you money, and large sums mind you, and you would promise me faithfully you would bring the car back that night, that you and I would be together, have sex, and then you wouldn't show. How many horrible, awful times? It has almost driven me mad!"

Mel looked up at him, trapped. "It won't ever happen again, Leland, honest!"

"Oh, yes it will!" Leland cried, flinging his cigarette in an enormous Italian cut-glass ash-tray and rising abruptly, strolled to the terrace edge and gazed over the banister. "Like last night! How honest were you then? That same sweet voice, that same beguiling look, that same false promise. 'I'll be back,' you said, 'before eleven, then you can have me sexually anyway you want.' Remember?" He turned, pointed a long finger at Mel. "Oh, how I lay and thought of all the beautiful things we would do. Like a damned fool I believed you again, and where did I find you this morning? You and that clodhopper in a run-down tourist camp out on Hammond Highway, and with a witch-haired broad I wouldn't allow to swab out my commode let alone have in bed!"

"That was Rusty's pick-up, not mine," Mel said.

Leland gave him a killing stare. "And where was yours?"

"I didn't have any!"

"Why not? You do everything else that Texan stud tells you!"

"'Cause—'cause I've been faithful to you, Leand, that's why."

Leland glared. "Faithful! What a sickening word in this rotten kind of world! How can you sit there calmly and say you've been faithful? Didn't Robin Calvo tell me not less than a week ago with his own nellie mouth that he took you to the Roosevelt?"

"That was a lie!" Mel snapped, rising and

going to the balcony rail. "He only paid for a room and bought me a meal, that's all."

Leland drew himself up to his full height. His lungs heaved. "So! He just bought you a meal and a room. That makes me so damn mad you could slice washers off my ass! Here you have one of the finest places in New Orleans, an apartment, money, food, so why in the name of hell would that faggot Robin have to set you up?"

Mel sniffed. "I just wanted to be alone," he said. "Away by myself for a while. Sometimes I just have to be alone, away from everybody."

Leland refused to look at him for a moment, as if, in reading the pleading light in his eyes he would also read indifference. "For God's sake, Mel! For once, tell me the truth!"

Mel looked at him frightened, saw all the wonders of his life since they had met slipping like sand through his greedy hands. But this once, even if he lost, he had to tell the truth. "Okay. Rusty was using the apartment."

Leland flung out both hands in theatrical fashion, dramatically. "A place to lay a broad!"

"A score," Mel stammered, fingering nervously the twisted limbs of the weathered bougainvillea vine that had entwined its numerous coils in and out of the lacy ironwork.

"Good God!" Leland stormed, dropping his arms with a loud slap to his thighs. "Now you've turned your apartment into a whore house!"

Mel looked up at him, almost as if for the first time, saw and understood something of the torture, the misery Leland had felt, had endured for him, for his security and happiness. And in seeing, he felt sorry for him, forgetting momentarily

that he was a queer and, according to hustler's standards, a victim to all sorts of profane and degrading abuse. Laying an anxious hand on Leland's sleeve, he saw something too of where this sordid life had led him, and he cried out with every ounce of his strength, his determination, his desire to do something with his future.

"Leland, I know I've been wrong about a lot of things. I know I've done you wrong. I know I've treated you like hell. But I wasn't always like this. Honest. I'm no hustler, not really. I never did anything like this with a man before I left Golden Meadow and came to new Orleans. I didn't hardly know anything at all about such crap until I came here. If only . . ."

Leland looked down at him, his eyes steady, gleaming. "If only what?"

"If only we could start over again, this time you could trust me."

"Oh, pleasant thought that!" Leland cried, his voice this time almost completely a feminine voice, with every trace of its masculinity gone, vanished somewhere in his female heart. "I'm not blaming you altogether, Mel. Maybe you're telling me the truth for once, though how I can believe you after all you've put me through is hard for me to understand. I must really love you, to trust you even though I know I am going to lose."

At that one word lose, Mel looked up at him with throbbing heart, irresolute now and frightened, troubled by the mere sound of it. He, too stood to lose, perhaps more than Leland. And he cried defensively: "Lose! Lose what?"

"You," Leland said calmly, without emotion.

At that, the meaning it dispelled, gladness poured into Mel's heart, and with that gladness everything was made automatically easy. "Lose me?" he said, sure of his own charm and its hold on Leland. "You won't ever lose me, Leland. Ever."

"I already have," answered Leland. There was a note of deep sadness in his voice. It was like speaking of a time long past, something dead and forgotten.

"How?" Mel cried frantically, his gaze turbulent, masked with regret.

Leland breathed heavily, as if hating to say what he must, as if he would have to say it even if it killed him. "I just can't go on like this. Not now. Not after knowing how you are, what you are really like."

"But I told you these things would never happen again," Mel half-screamed, catching hold of him. "Don't you believe me?"

Leland smiled a bitter smile, his lip twisting down at one corner with a jeer. He went to a chair and slumped into it, tired, defeated at last. He was like a man with a terrible wound from which venom and corruption oozed from all sides.

"You say that like a kid in school just caught stealing an apple and thinking people will believe you didn't do it. Oh, Mel," he cried, lifting heavy eyelids and fixing his hungry gaze on him. "Must you always be so naive? Can't you understand? Even if you did tell the truth, from now on I couldn't believe you. Not now. Not ever again."

Mel clutched at his heart at the finality in

Leland's voice, though he spoke quietly. He gazed forlornly over the balcony, watched numbly all the hurrying people going to and fro along Conti Street, glanced absently over the rooftops of the Quarter, to the horizon south, to Golden Meadow and to home.

There was where it all began, he thought sadly, as memories of home welled up in his paining heart, as the deprivation and degradation, the misery, the dirt, the anarchic nightworld he had known, and despised loomed like a nightmare in his tortured mind. He could never go back home and he trembled at the thought of returning to the square, the streets, the uncertainty of the hustling world.

He looked then to Leland, saw in him all the comfort, the money, the clothes, the good times he had had, and he knew he must, if he would save himself, employ every guile. He would have to exert every boyish charm if he would salvage Leland's respect, his admiration for him, for his young body if not his love. Leaving the balcony hurriedly, he rushed to the chair and leaned over him, his heart in his eyes, the words on the tip of his tongue to say; "I love you. I love you." Instead, he muttered gravely, as if out of breath: "Leland, forgive me! Please forgive me! We'll start all over. Like that first day at the tower. Just you and me. I'll do anything you want me to do, in bed. I won't lie anymore, and I'll be yours if—if you still want me."

Leland lifted his tired, defiant eyes and fixed them feebly on Mel, like a man might gaze on a precious jewel in the hands of an enemy.

"Mel, what is wrong with you hustlers?" he

asked at last, laying a trembling finger under Mel's chin. "What is wrong with the hustling world? All of you are the same, rags cut from the same pattern. You walk the streets, hungry, dirty, alone, jobless, defenseless, prowling for some score who will take you in, love you, give you money, a home, a car, clothes. And when you find that at last you become rebellious. You treat him like an enemy. You lie. You profane him. You have no respect for him. You cheat him in every manner imaginable. Why? Like me: I wanted you. I wanted to be good to you. I wanted to love you. I didn't expect you to love me in return, for I knew you liked girls. But I did want respect, your honesty, your body, and in part your heart."

"I know that now," Mel declared, bending still further over him, kneeling at his feet, thinking that, with his declaration he was miraculously making everything right. "If you would only give me another chance, let me make it up to you. I promise you I'll go straight. I won't ever hustle again. Anything you want me to do I'll do. Please!"

Leland gave him a ghostly look. "Anything?" he asked. "You would promise anything?"

"Yes!" Mel cried, his eyes burning, anxious.

"Then give up Rusty!"

"Rusty?" A pain fought its way into Mel's heart. How could he give up Rusty? His only friend? His only true friend? Why, his love for Leland was no more than a ghost shadow in a ghost room compared to his love, his deep manly love for Rusty! He wouldn't give him up. He couldn't. He was all he had. Yet, he must! He

knew he must, as dark visions loomed into his mind, menacingly, threateningly, of the streets and the prowling inmates, the anonymous exiles like himself, like Rusty. He visualized the hunger, the dirt, the profaned nightworld to which he would be sentenced, doomed, unless—unless he gave up Rusty, unless he gave him back to the gutters, the rancid darkness, the loneliness in the midst of a crowd.

A tear ran down his cheek, dropped on his hand like a hot, futile drop of fresh blood. And he whispered fretfully: "I'll give him up."

JANUARY

Mel sat alone in one of the unpainted booths in the Bull Ring on St. Philip Street waiting for Rusty to show. Dully, with his thoughts swinging from one extreme to the other, he absently made circles on the knife-scarred table with his beer which he drank from a can.

The Bull Ring was owned and operated by a hefty dyke who looked more like a man than a real man, and the dilapidated place had become a kind of refuge for the hustlers, the vagrants,

the junkies, the teaheads, the panhandlers, the drifters, the pushers and pickpockets, a few nymphos and a horde of shaggy Lesbians, all the unwanted misfits, the exiles who loitered around the square, at the Cafe Demonde sipping black coffee, prowling the canopied walks of the French Market stealing fruits and candies, ghosts lumbering along the wharfs to fleece the incoming sailors and dockhands, and haunting the corners around the St. Louis Cathedral, in Pirate's Alley where the mangy artists plied their trade.

The beginning of January had brought on a monsoon of daily rains, that first touch of winter, and as it poured down outside, making waterfalls around the low eaves, prowlers of the night sought shelter until they could return to their haunts, finding momentary refuge within this soot-blackened retreat.

For the past week Mel had dodged these depraved toughs, these cheap trade hustlers, these ragged boys who were the dregs of the Quarter as he had been before he met Leland Freret. With luck, they managed to pick up the older scores, winos, men from the foreign ships who did not have time enough ashore to find a woman and were willing to pay a boy, men too shy to court more attractive catches, and men who, drained of all their worldly resources, could score with these rancid boys for a few dimes, a pack of cigarettes, a night's lodging in some rathole on Gravier or Poydras.

Glancing minutely, soberly over the motley throng, Mel decided that they all knew it, despised him, because Leland had left him for

good. They sought on opening in his haughty veneer, acquired by and through Leland's wealth, for them to drag him down, to ridicule him, to mock him and, with the exactness of nellie queens, to turn maliciously accusing now that he was dethroned.

No one was envied or hated more than a hustler, especially the common male hustler of the back streets, when he had latched onto a wealthy score. Nothing gave them more pleasure and excitement than to see a hustler fall back into the gutter.

They could invent all manner of reasons and motives why he had not been able to hang onto a good score, could give beguiling advice on how to keep him, always the essence of experience, and at the same time ridicule and put him down for his carelessness and his lack of wit and guile, maliciously laughing under their breath at his miserable failure.

When days were lean they gathered their forces, discussed battle manuevers, eyed prospective clients, retold for the hundredth time the rich score they had but dropped for some unworthy girl. And when there was a kill, they either divided their take with fellow hustlers or were driven from the packs.

Mel had not divided. Perhaps a pack of cigarettes now and then, a meal, the price of a beer, a dollar for a movie, but never more than that. So they regarded him as an untouchable since he had elevated his station among them by taking up with Leland Freret.

All except Rusty. He had divided everything he had with Rusty, from whom he could not

part. Clothes, spending money, the car when he could get it, and even his lush apartment when Rusty needed a place to take a score.

Now, from the long formica covered bar, from the multi-colored juke-box, from the various tables turned askew, they eyed him maliciously, with acid contempt. Like hungry wolves they were clamorous to tear him piecemeal. Seated there alone, utterly alone now without either Leland or Rusty to back him, he felt their malevolent stares and half-heard their cracking voices, their sneers, their open insults.

God! If only Rusty would come!

Turning toward the doorway repeatedly, he stared through the curtain of gray rain, but hopelessly. Now and then several hustlers would rush through the waterfall pouring from the low eaves and come into the lounge, soaked, only adding miserably to the rancid odor. As they passed his table, shaking water from their sodden clothes they would put him down with timely insults:

"That old sugardaddy dry you up?"

"What's the matter, Mel, that stuck up son of a bitch find himself another stud?"

"Going straight, Mel?"

"You can't stand in the bread-line with us in them duds!"

"Well! Look who's come home!"

"Have a beer, Mel, its on the house. Arty will pay, won't you, Arty?"

"Like almighty God and hell!" yelled Arty, the bull dyke, wringing out a bar rag and flinging it over one shoulder. "Ye didn't see that pretty stud when he was getting the fuck-pay. Riding

up and down these streets in that shiny Jaguar, didn't know us from bums any more. If the law hadn't taken my switch blade I'd cut him a pussy!" With one blacksmith arm, she jerked open one of the iced lids behind the bar, brought out a can of frosted beer. Flipping off the top, she threw it to one of the bosomy nymphos seated on a tall wooden stool. "Here, Powder-puff, make yourself a belt." Going around the bar like a truck driver edging for a fight, she went to Mel's table, slapped the beer down in front of him. The suds foamed out. "Changed my mind, divorcee!" she spat, glaring down at him with hot, animal eyes, eyes starving for violence. "Gonna buy you a drink after all. It's on the fuckin' house. To celebrate your FREE-DOM!"

Yells, like at a football game in the bowl, all but ripped the walls of the building.

"I can pay," Mel said, with a grit of his teeth. God! how he hated dykes.

"Oh," the dyke cooed, folding her arms over breasts drawn tight with under-bindings to make her look masculine, as if, Mel thought, she needed that. "Your alimony?"

There was another roar of laughter, drowning out the jukebox.

Edged on now by this robust, rancid dyke, multiplied by the rebellious yells, the cursing, thought of his loss of Leland welling up within him, jamming emotionally at his tortured throat, Mel wanted to scream at her, at them, longed frantically to strangle everyone who glared at him, to lash out, not so much at them as individuals, but as a massed group which so over-

whelmingly magnified his loss of Leland. These starving drifters from the streets had seen his rise with eyes of jealous envy and they were witnessing his downfall with venom, a venom spiced with joy that he was no better, no more fortunate than they. Too, his dethronement only testified to the futility of their anarchic world, the doom of it, and this reality, harsh and unfair as it was, fortified them still to take revenge on Mel.

He glared back at them, partly out of his own unfortunate loss and his wretched state of mind for not using his cunning, then at the sweaty dyke who loomed above him like the Jolly Green Giant.

"You go to hell, you bull without nuts!" he spat at her, hoping, out of his own misery, to arouse misery in her. It worked.

Like lightning her huge hand shot out and slapped him full across the face. The blow made him reel, and he saw thousands of tiny stars.

"Who are you to be putting me down with names," she screamed, her bloodshot eyes, enormous now, streaked with frustration and unfulfillment, lashing out at him with invisible rays. "What are you? A whore with a dick! A motherfuckin' street-walking whore with a dick and balls and an asshole in place of a pussy!"

This coveted expression, admired and used daily by all the inmates of this dirty, infested lounge, brought the house down.

"Now guzzle that beer and get!" she rattled on, spurred by the malicious mob and basking in the hideous attitude she had achieved, the ugly act upon which everyone's rapt attention was

drawn, one more of her daily rituals which always seemed to lure in the customers, and which multiplied her popularity in this offbeat lounge.

"You guzzle it!" Mel shot back at her, rising from his chair. "If you gave it away, then you must have pissed it!" At that he flung the foamy beer in her face. She gasped for breath, as it ran foaming down her face, into her greasy sweatshirt.

A murmur went up among the crowd. This meant a fight and, with every one clamorous for violence, for blood, they made a wide circle.

For an instant, as if stunned, hypnotized, she just stood there rooted to the spot, her eyes like daggers on those of Mel, who, in his sudden wrath and despair, tried to stare her down.

"Boy! Am I gonna have myself some fun with you!" she cried finally, rolling up her sleeves, her legs spread wide apart, like a Saturday night wrestler waiting in the corner of the ring. "That stuck up score ain't gonna know you from a pile of shit when I get through with you. Gonna crawl on you, purty boy, like an ape."

Mel was ready. Lost to everything now but his own wretchedness, suddenly like the avenging mob which moved closer in, he craved the danger, the thrill of a fight, of sudden hostility, the joy of throwing things and hearing them shatter under his frantic power. Noticing an empty beer bottle on a nearby table, he jerked it up, crashed it against the edge of a chair, and held it out to her, challenging, threateningly.

"Oh!" she yelled playfully, mocking him, laughing. "Want to fight like a girl huh? Come on, be a boy! Put up your fists!"

Laughter shook the very foundations of the rickety building.

"Gonna fight like a man?" the bull dyke raved on, provoking him. "Or am I gonna have to get out my fingernail file and rip your bra off!"

"You ain't going to do nothing, Arty!" came a deep, masculine yell from the dark, bodiless mob.

It was Rusty. He pushed his way through the laughing, cursing sea of human flesh, and to Mel's side.

"Lay off, Rusty!" the dyke yelled, motioning with an arm. "Ain't got no quarrel with you! It's with this male hussy!"

Rusty grabbed her by the wrist, and like lightning brought it round to her back, forcing it up behind her neck.

"Gonna have you busted for this!" she screamed, as he pinched tighter and tighter on her nerves.

"You ain't going to do nothing, but shit if you eat!" he flung back at her. Then with all his effort he shoved her away from him. She struck the bar, as people around it were crushed under her ponderous weight. Bottles and glasses came tumbling to the floor. Their breaking shattered the sudden stillness, the awed hush at the violence which hung in the odorous darkness of the lounge.

Then with ease, Rusty grabbed Mel by the arm before he realized what was taking place, relieved him of the broken bottle, led him through the mob and out into the downpour of rain, into an alley, between two rows of garbage cans, some of them upturned, litter spilled on the shining wet bricks, the rancid odors of rotten

cabbage and onions and garlic and coffee beans and stale beer stagnating in the grey veils of rain.

"What happened?" Rusty asked, still holding Mel's arm, their faces close, drenched with rain, shining pale and luminous like statues of white marble.

Mel told him in a throaty voice, filled with tiny echoes and sighs. "All on account of Leland leaving me," he concluded.

"What?" Rusty shouted, making his voice heard above the rapid downbeat of the rain.

"He's through with me. For good!" Mel said, looking up into Rusty's puzzled, woebegone face. "Said if I tried to come back he'd call the fuzz. Have me busted."

"Why? For the love of God, why?" Rusty cried, shaking him until he could hardly breathe. "If you don't tell me I'm going to whip your ass, instead of letting Arty do it for me."

Mel began to whimper. He squirmed in Rusty's tight grip. Looking up into his rain-washed face, he shrank back appalled. He had never seen Rusty look like that before. His eyes! They were so hard, so utterly cold! Like a man insane!

"He said—he said if I didn't stop seeing you he would leave me for good," Mel cried at last, fighting having to say it, but knowing he must. He had put oft telling him for days. Now, the truth was out. And with the truth his agony of the heart, for he didn't want to leave Rusty, not ever, though he did not understand why.

"Then stop seeing me," Rusty said bluntly, as unconcerned as if he was giving him the time of day.

"I can't," Mel answered, bowing his head s that Rusty could not read the love in his eyes "I just can't! If I lose everything: money, th car, the apartment, clothes, good times. Rusty just can't let you go. Ever!"

Rusty's eyes grew to enormity, and deep furrows lined his brow. "You little fool!" he shouted, and he shook Mel until his teeth rattled. "Ain't I taught you nothing about taking care of queers? Hell, tell him you're through seeing me. That don't mean you are, does it?" Mel shook his head obediently, his mind whirling. "You and I can see each other on the sly. That lousy old cocksucker won't ever find out in this big town, Man! Lots of places we can go, get us some quail! Keep feeding him that rod you got, what do you think it's for, beside to piss out of?" He shook him again, then slammed him back against the garbage cans.

"I won't," Mel cried defensively, seeing, but momentarily, and with harsh clarity, what he would have to submit to with Leland Freret in order for him and Rusty to have the things they wanted, needed. And he cried out again, this time with his love for Rusty in every tone. "I won't let him do to me what he wants to do with me now. Not for all the money in the world."

"What does he want you to do?" Rusty asked, demandingly.

Mel all but wilted, as if the downpour of rain, in its rapid onslaught, was melting him in its grey torrents.

"He—he wants to screw me," he said, as his tears mingled with the wetness which poured between them.

Rusty glared at him, his eyes like cold, relentless swords. "Is that all? Shit, Babe. Let him fuck you. It won't hurt much!"

Mel shook his head, for he could find no answer to this. He looked up at Rusty, noticed his eyes, his dark, wet lashes, and read in them something harsh and dreadful he did not want to read.

"Let's get outa here," he cried, moving nearer to Rusty, laying a trembling hand on his chest. "Anywhere Rusty! Just you and me. We'll make it somehow. Together. We'll make it."

"You go to hell!" Rusty screamed, growling his words, and the eyes that burned into Mel's were the most awesome he had ever seen. In them he saw the true defeat, the real reason Rusty had ever befriended him in the first place, though his numbed heart, so stunned momentarily by the sudden unexpected blow could not take it in. He couldn't believe, wouldn't believe that Rusty would desert him like the other hustlers, like the drifters and the junkies and the teaheads and the pushers who made up his crummy world. Not Rusty, his only friend!

"Rusty ... please!" he murmured, spreading both hands, feeling, for a second, how far they seemed apart, so distant, so cold, so hazy in the wild torrents of wintry rain.

At that, Rusty growled something undistinguishable, and with a lightning-like thrust of his fist, struck him full upon the lower jaw. Mel sprawled backwards, losing his balance. He fell into the stacks of rusty cans. They went down together, the rotten garbage spilling over him, soaking him with the rancid slush and rain.

He could feel the drops of rain hitting him in the face like rifle pellets, and he tried to move, but there was an awful pain at the back of his head, where he had struck the pavement.

Then, as if out of some kind of long awaited dream, he could feel his body being lifted up, or at least his head, his shoulders, felt Rusty's strong arms holding him. At last, at long last!

Feebly he opened his eyes, saw as if from heaven Rusty's dark face bending over his, felt hot lips pressing into his wet lips, felt arms snuggle him to a warm, powerful chest.

Then, as if from hell he heard him whisper mournfully, spelling out his doom: "Good-bye, Mel Babe. Good-bye!"

Then, he was gone through the darkness, his cowboy booted heels making haunting echoes on the wet stones. Finally, as he lay in the rain and listened, his heart crying for him to come back, the sounds died in the distance.

FEBRUARY

Mardi Gras, Shrove Tuesday, the day before Ash Wednesday, pre-lenten season, street parades, carnival, festivity, the greatest free show on earth!

A show in which tens of thousands of visitors from all over America participate. They were here this year, flooding the streets and the sidewalks of the old Quarter, hundreds in make-believe costumes, thousands in masks, pouring in and out of bars and lounges, through private homes whose doors were flung open for the public, in the square, the French Market, a surging human sea, a multi-colored circus!

One more tossing, churning wave in this enormous sea that seemed to have no shore was Mel, slightly drunk, his burning eyes searching frantically for Rusty. His tortured heart thumped with wilder, more desperate anticipation every time his thoughts brought the vision of him in the gutter that rain-washed night Rusty had kissed him, sealing that magnetic something between them at last, the rapport Mel had felt all these many months with him but could not explain to himself or put into proper words.

But now he knew!

Rusty loved him, and he in turn loved Rusty. It was as simple as that! Love without the usual ogligations and symptoms of love. Love torn out of their own mutual loneliness, their degradation, their misery and privation, love so beautiful blooming in the wretched garden of this nightmare world, this anarchic hell of the night, the streets, holding them together, inseparable. No matter what they did, however contrary to rules people usually apply to love, they always returned to each other's companionship as food, as needed courage ending loneliness, that certain something about the other which had, in its magnetic pull, the power to rearm them for future victories in this hellish night war of sex or starvation.

The very thing they both had hated, had denied existence to in their own male environment, had brought them together, not money, which had teamed them with scores, not thrill (for men had never thrilled them) but a thing of themselves—what they both were, what they represented to each other. Now, desperately,

frantically, Mel searched for that other part of himself, in searching for Rusty, hopeful of bringing him to bay at last to fulfill, with their bodies together, the empty void which both had left unfullfilled.

Coming out of the Red Garter, he nosed his way through the pushing, shoving mob. He had hocked all the clothes and jewelry Leland had bought him, making a clean break with him, with all men, now that he knew what he wanted, what he must have. With the balm of Rusty's declared love to give him courage, determination, he had decided never to hustle again, never to allow another man to touch him ... unless it was Rusty!

As if reborn, washed clean and innocent with this knowledge, he thought only of himself and Rusty together in the future, regardless of how it looked, queer or otherwise. There was suddenly nothing else but Rusty in his world. Rusty's lips. Rusty's eyes. Rusty's Texan drawl speaking to him about casual things, things which made no sense whatsoever then he had spoken them. Now they meant everything. Just the sound of his voice, his smile, his flashing devil-may-care eyes!

If only he could find him!

Spurred almost to the point of rage, he scanned the faces rakishly: fumed, impatiently allowing his nerves to run askew of his senses, as face after face met him head on, pushed, shoved, none of them belonging to Rusty.

Faces in glittering sequined masks, faces in Hollywood makup, faces with black patches over one eye, pirate-fashion, faces hidden completely in enormous papier-mache heads made to re-

semble Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, Pluto, faces grotesque with hideous headwear from some horror movie, faces out of the future, astronauts, men from Mars, faces demure in the black half masks of dominoes, faces peering from the shaggy beards of the Ozarks, many Lil Abners, Daisy Maes, masculine faces dyked out like women, heavily painted to erase four-o'clock shadows, eyes like Cleopatra staring him down, faces from mythology: Adonis, naked except for a jock strap, Alla, Zeus, Vulcan with his anvil, Dukes, maids, captains, pages in peppermint stripes, cowboys! Many, many cowboys, one in a pair of flapping chaps and no pants, his backside completely naked, a figure running down the street aflame, his costume made from streamers of iridescent paper, nuns again, clowns, clowns, clowns! A face like President Johnson. On his arm was a girl painted to resemble a negro. Beneath her dress was stuffing to announce her pregnancy and around her neck a card saying: "Ah's went all de way wiff L.B.J." A man seated on a shiny white commode on baby carriage wheels, with a sign *King Commode*, and a boy naked to the waist, his lower portion encased in a birdbath with real feathered birds perched on his naked arms, his shoulders, his tits, his shining sequined hair. More men, tall and lanky, as if on stilts, dressed like women.

But no Rusty!

Mel pushed his way into the Coffee Pot. This was one of his and Rusty's hang-outs. His eyes went crazily over the humming mob. Back again into the streets.

More clowns, more cowboys. Pirates, girls in

hoop-skirts—or were they boys in hoop-skirts? Hippies, out of costume with a guitar.

He went into the Finale. It was packed like sardines in a can. Men in elaborate drag, wigs so fantastic they looked like showgirls, long slinky gowns, mesh hose over shaved legs, spiked heels, all of them trying to look appealing, putting on recklessly, like real girls! This one night before Ash Wednesday when they could make the scene in full masquerade without interference from the vice squad. Wide-brimmed hats made of lace, trimmed with false roses, as if to advertise their own falseness symbolically, velvet gloves to hairy elbows, gowns cut to the waist, slashed to the thigh, veils, scarfs, stoles of white fur, diamonds, dripping jewelry, cigarettes in long sequined holders: Marilyn Monroe and Jayne Mansfield and several Mae Wests.

Mel edged his way to the bar. He motioned drunkenly for the tall blond bartender. "Have you seen Rusty?"

The bartender shook his head, his blue eyes speculatively on Mel.

"Would you give him my address if you see him please?" He strung out the word please, very lovingly.

The blond behind the bar smiled, twitched his head, flipped a braceleted wrist. "I'd do anything for yon, baby!"

Mel had used some of the money from hocking his clothes to rent a pad on St. Philip Street, a run-down tenant building occupied by negroes and whites. He scribbled an address on a piece of paper torn from his cigarette package and handed it to the blond.

"I'll find him if I have to cruise him myself," said the bartender taking the slip of paper and sticking it in his shirt pocket.

"Have a drink, Mel dear. On the house!"

Mel accepted. He had to hang onto his money. He didn't have to go with the guy just because of a drink. The man brought him a frosty Manhattan with a dash of Angostura bitters. It was delicious. Men, their crotches protruding, rubbed against his behind. He pressed closer to the bar. Strangely, he wanted none of them, their charades, their starving sexy eyes, their effeminate mannerisms.

He groped his way to the doorway, still clutching his drink. His gaze went lazily over the faces half-hidden in smoky darkness. Where was Rusty? Of all the faces eyeing him wantonly, eyes ensilvered, eyes cold with their sex deliberation, eyes frozen, locked on his person, none of them were Rusty's.

Rusty! Where in the hell was Rusty?

Then as if hypnotized his gaze swung round to a pair of eyes he remembered. Where? When? Was it someone he thought he recognized? Was it a score he had gone to bed with? He looked again, and then, as his face went crimson, he remembered.

It was Glen.

Drunkenly, as his frustrated mind cleared, he saw the motorcycle, the little cozy apartment Glen had rented for him, the clothes, and with new clarity his own deception, his cheating, lying.

Glen was still looking. His gaze, fixed, frozen, malicious but curbing that maliciousness, bore through Mel from across the chasm of darkness.

Accusing! Ridiculing! Putting him down with silence!

Guilt tore at him like claws. Desperate to escape those burning, condemning eyes, he rammed his body through the freakish, sequined forms who were pouring like a foaming cascade of lace and satin into the lounge. A moment more and he was in the streets again.

Disneyland, in all its storybook glory, invaded the sidewalks, animals, toys, all grotesquely human and oversized, all heads and feet, making the unreal night still more hauntingly unreal. More clowns, more cowboys. One, with a square cut out in his tight honey colored jeans, his ass exposed. Heathcliff chasing Cathy. The Hunchback of Notre Dame with Esmerelda on his ragged arm. A boy and a girl from old Russia, with War and Piece written on their bosoms. An impish boy in high drag! Witches, elves, gnomes,

Mel staggered into a lounge on Royal Street. He made his way to the head. Under the burning glow of red bulbs screwed into the ceiling he found his way to the urinal. A man in Roman armor was having trouble getting to his organ. Metal squeaked. Finally, with drunken deliberation, he let the armor fall with a clang around his booted ankles, standing naked at the urinal. In one dark corner of the head two men, old, white-haired, were in the throes of a complicated sex act. In one of the booths, the door invitingly ajar, sat a young boy on the smelly commode, caressing his naked inner thighs.

Mel lumbered out, fought his way through the laughing, drinking mob, and back into the streets. He cased Lafittes' In Exile, Nellie's, the

Coffee Pot once more, even the Bull Ring, the most unlikely place Rusty would hang out for he, like Mel, hated dykes. Then, from ghost room to ghost room he wandered drunkenly, unsteadily on his feet, undermined by drink and his desire for Rusty, fury burning with smothered fires within every vein, trapped there like a wild thing until he found Rusty to set it free.

Rusty! Where in the hell was Rusty?

On the corner of Royal and Toulouse a flamboyant negro queen followed him. In the shoving, swaying mob he caught up. "Sho' do lak yo' box," the negro came on strong.

Mel glared at him. "You go to hell! You black bastard!" he cried out vehemently, not so much for the black giggling queen, as to all those like him, the ghost forms who had anonymously dragged him down into his Jezebel night world, holding him prisoner, refusing to set him free.

"Rusty!" he began to sob. Lost! Lost!

Above, in the purple darkness, storm clouds raked the buildings, tearing themselves to shreds on the T.V. antennas and the spires of the St. Louis Cathedral. Paper garlands strung from terrace to terrace streamed down and were caught up in the storm wind to flap against the iron lacework like torn sails. Confetti drifted everywhere, every color in the spectrum. Laughter rose and fell like waves in a wind-tossed sea. Music poured from jukebox after jukebox, each blaring its own kind of hell.

It began to rain, softly at first, like a threat, a whisper, then it came down in bitter, enraged torrents. People scurried indoors, jammed the passageways, stampeded. Papier maché masks

melted. Costumes of gauze, of crinoline, of crepe paper, of thin veil silk clung to wet hides, the semi-naked made naked by the wet transparent rags clinging to thighs, arms, breasts!

Cascades of water poured from guttered eaves like miniature waterfalls. As Mel compulsively crossed Dumaine which lay strangely unlit, going as if drawn over old paths he and Rusty had traversed, their old daily haunts, a figure loomed out of the curtains of rain. It was a boy with long Jesus hair and beard, his pale white face like that of a saint. His costume too was that of Christ, long white robes which clung to his naked body beneath, and his sandaled feet were soaked. He came, as if floating through the driving water in the street, directly up to Mel. His pale blue eyes stared, groped, as he swayed dizzily on his feet. He was sodden drunk!

"My cross," he murmured dream-like. "I've lost my cross."

Mel made a wide detour around him, and he faded into the blinding darkness.

"Rusty! Rusty!" he sobbed louder now, seemingly alone in the streets, the mobs had vacated, alone in this dark and wet night world.

As his lover, though yet unknown, Mel felt the weight of sorrow that lay on Rusty in that distant place, wherever he was! Felt his spirit, in pain, urgent upon his own troubled heart, his own misguided agony. Surely, he reckoned defensively, he would be foolish, even as a man, to give himself finally to one whose personality was not large enough to dominate him, like Leland, and he looked away toward the Prince Conti, wondered what he was doing at this hour. A wild

party probably, with everyone in drag! And Rusty's personality, even at this moment, though far away he seemed, lost to him forever in the drenched festival night, dominated his own, and being dominated, he truly felt his grief and joy of that wonderful mind in absence as well as in bodily presence.

Now, as if awakening from this strange Mardi Gras dream, in this hour after two, a hour for him filled with visions and portents, his vitality lowest, and as if all the celebrators were dead, slipping away, he heard Rusty's voice quite clearly saying: "Good-bye, Mel, good-bye!"

Rain washed on the glass fronts of the stores, making him feel hemmed in within a circular goldfish bowl. In the streets the rushing water made a river. He started to turn back into the world of glamour, lights, people, but something drove him on. He was wet through and completely exhausted. His heart was broken. He was utterly alone in the world, with no one knowing or no one caring.

Broken, yes was his heart, but still alive enough to cry out: "Rusty! Rusty!"

He came to the building where he lived, a dark shape against the windy darkness. He climbed the iron-lace steps, careful not to tip over the rows of potted plants, as if in his own heartsore delirium, he cared.

No use to look further, he thought, Rusty was gone. Gone forever! And at such an awesome thought he clutched wildly at his own heart, as if a dagger had pierced it.

At the top of the stairs he halted, heedless of the torrents of rain that beat against his

drenched hide, his soiled jeans, his yellow Arnel sports shirt, his white sneakers. Through the dim, fly-specked Palladian doorway a light glowed invitingly. Had he left it on uncaring in his heartfelt delirium?

Drunkenly he peered in. There was Rusty sprawled on the tasseled bed! He had received the message Mel had left with the blonde at the lounge! A sudden triumph flooded his tired heart. He opened the glass door and tip-toed across the golden-lit room to the side of the bed. Rusty was obviously drunk, his naked body spread-eagled. One look at that dark mystery of him and something inside Mel turned upside down. With the one window beside the bed sheeted in rain, in the early light, fantastic patterns ran wild over Rusty's huge chest, his enormous legs, his hard, widely spread thighs, thighs spread invitingly, and the glory of him there exposed, unhusked for the first time to Mel's eyes since they had met a year ago.

He eased closer to the bed, drinking in Rusty's beautiful body with eyes starving for sex, love, understanding, all the things he thought Rusty possessed and were rightfully, automatically his, now that he had found him at long last. Suddenly he was stone sober, and never before in his young life were his senses, his vision clearer, or his veins so throbbing with thrill and ecstasy.

Rusty!

His head, tousled, was sunk a little forward. The broad, beautiful brow looked pale, weary. The long lashes that had never made him look girlish lay on cheeks grown thinner in the last month, where the fine, clean bone showed more

than it used to. And at the sight, knowing of the neglect, the abandonment he had been exposed to in the life of the streets, tears welled up in his eyes.

Never again will he suffer or want, Mel made a solemn oath to himself as he stood there, awed by his beauty. And he wondered, almost with furious jealousy, if Rusty had found someone else during their trial of absence. A man or a woman?

Desperately, he longed to know. He would hate them. He would destroy them.

Oh no no! If Rusty loved someone else, then Rusty should have them. Jealousy anew at the thought caught at his heart, ran wild through every nervous vein.

"Stay asleep! Oh, stay asleep!" he whispered, as sexual ambition stirred deep within his loins, this long awaited time bringing them together at last in this mouldy, sodden, facaded lair.

This urge was like an incantation. Mel might have been then, in this change which had crept upon him slowly, more certain of his emotions than he had ever been in his life, how was he to know? Rusty, in his drunkness, out cold, might have been some young mariner under the green water, and Mel the veritable mermaid of the old seafaring legend, charming him to slumber.

Stripping off his wet clothes, nervous now that the time had come at last, Mel slipped into bed with him and, as he did so, Rusty pulled him into his strong brown arms, so warm, so lovingly, as if they belonged together all their lives.

And in this sudden realization, all things came clearly to Mel—what he was to Rusty, what he

had become, what he was automatically obligated to do if he was to make Rusty happy, content. And, allowing his lips to caress Rusty's body, going over his warm nipples, his dimpled navel where began a black patch of wiry hair, he slid on down into the dark, savage hollow of his loins.

MARCH

Mel's life had turned full circle. Utterly, grievously ashamed of what he had done with Rusty the previous drunken night, he had crept out of the flat at dawn, and now sat on one of the iron-lace benches in Jackson Square comtemplating going home. Back to Golden Meadow to face the music.

He had been gone a year now and, as he sat tiredly thinking over his life since he had come to New Orleans, he realized painfully that nothing had come of it. He thought of the many men he had scored, the money they vainly, sometimes

haughtily, sometimes superciliously had given him, and how quickly he had blown it on junk, booze, good times. He thought regretfully of his brief relation with Glen, the shiny new motorcycle, selling it and the grand time he and Rusty had spending it, and of Leland Freret and his gracious donations, clothes, jewelry, a sports car, a lush apartment and, in seeing and realizing his own plight, he saw with harsh comprehension the futility of the hustler's existence.

It didn't pay!

Or, it hadn't paid off with him ... or Rusty!

Glancing down at his spread legs, noticing with disdain his faded jeans, his threadbare canvas loafers, his yellow shirt which had seen far better times, he saw with eruptive, almost grievous clarity where this anarchic life of the streets had led him—nowhere! He had moved in a small circle, had risen to some heights but had failed and fallen miserably. He asked himself numbly where he had failed, but he could find no answer.

The March winds were warm from the tropical Gulf, and as they lifted the bits of garlands and confetti from the flagstones, the flotsam and jetsam of the Mardi Gras festival, they drifted back to settle on the stones persistently, like ghosts of the festival now vanquished, shades of the departed, menacing shadows of that festival of gaiety and drunkness, of abandon and sex, the glittering bits of confetti winking back the sun like the diamonds on the trailing gown of a beautiful woman, a woman who, long since departed, still leaves her essence of glamour in her perfume and the glittering jewels.

As all festivals, when over, leave the ghost

haunt of sadness, so did Mel feel sad now, lost, as bereaved as the first day he had come to sit in this sunny square.

Azaleas made fantastic fires along the shaded paths, banana leaves reflected the sunlight like green plastic sails, and the snowy magnolias thrust frosty petals from dark green waxed leaves. The wind, mournful, sighed in the deep emerald evergreens, and rattled the vines of the new-minted Bougainvillia, as if it too, grieving for the departed festival, was trying to follow in its wake.

There were but a few stragglers in the park, the last of the vast army which had invaded the Quarter during Mardi Gras, making haunting trails of memory, as if, like the confetti and the wind, they were searching vainly for the throng which had vanished as mysteriously as it had appeared. One day they were here in multitudes and the next day gone—and to where? Vanished.

A wino in shabby clothes, remnants of a World War II uniform, sat on one of the benches at the extremity of the square. He was bent double, holding his guts with both hands, and his face was like a gray mask, a mask that could have been wrought from discarded ashes. A bosomy woman, her hair dyed a flaming red, sat near him, her enormous body draped untidly on the bench. Her lipstick was smeared across her mouth, and her lips moved as if she might be praying. Through the square a young kid strolled, lost, his hands in his kakhi pants pockets, no more than seventeen. His hair was platinum blond, a face like those on male nude books. His stance and gait were definitely that of the

inexperienced hustler, here for the festival and yet to score!

What a sad sack, Mel said to himself with acid disgust, as he watched with disinterest the kid cross the square and cross Decatur to the Cafe Demonde. He wished he could give him some advice.

Into the square now came the uniformed Salvation Army like crows following the festival to pick up the leavings. They set up near the gardener's shack, in the even glare of sunlight, and began to play, brass horns blatting, tambourines rattling. Voices were uplifted, springing from the unpainted lips of the young uniformed virgins. An old negro woman, selling pralines, set down her basket and joined in, her voice heavy, throaty, lachrymose:

> "On Jordan's stormy banks I stand
> And cast a wistful eye
> To Canaan's far and happy land
> Where my possessions lie."

Mel blinked back tears as he thought of home and then of Rusty, his emotions pulled between two magnetic poles.

A man came up to him. Although he was dressed in a fine silk suit, he had slept in his clothes and his bloodshot eyes caressed Mel's body with obvious hunger, almost devouring him with his gaze. He gestured for Mel to follow him.

Mel stared at him. "You go to hell, you fuckin' queer!" Then he gave him the finger.

The man sauntered off, caught up with the blonde kid. They went into the Cafe Demonde together.

With faint heart, yet with a frail hope, Mel examined the contents of his pocket. He had two dollars and a few cents—enough for a ticket to Golden Meadow. Home!

Slowly, as if held by anchor chains, he got up from the hard, iron seat and made his way reluctantly across the square.

Rusty wouldn't want him now, not after last night, he pondered as a flutter pounded in his heart. There was nothing else to keep him in New Orleans, the square, this kind of nightmare life.

He had to stand in line at the ticket window at the Greyhound terminal, one more exile in retreat, and when at last it came his time to buy, the man asked, "Where to, son?"

"To Golden Meadow," Mel gulped, tears burning his eyes anew at the sound of his own voice.

"Round trip?" the man asked.

"One way," Mel replied dryly. As he was laying his money on the counter a hand reached out and fastened firmly on his wrist. He turned abruptly, shocked. It was Rusty!

"Rusty," he cried unexpectedly, and how he adored his name!

He laid his hands as if for comfort on the counter. Rusty was looking at him, but Mel could not look, so gutted he was with shame. But he knew that Rusty was going to make him look. Slowly, Mel lifted his eyes, heedless, completely unaware of the anxious, impatient people behind him in the line. And there he was, more real than any of his dreams. Rusty, the boy he loved!

"It's not that easy, Mel Babe" Rusty spoke

at last, as they moved unconsciously out of the line and stood facing each other. "Let's take a walk. I want to talk to you."

As if conquered, Mel followed obediently, and they left the station, took Tulane Avenue up to Loyola and turned in at the Civic Center. Rusty motioned for him to sit down on one of the stone seats which form a semi-circle around the shining silver flag-poles flying flags from every country of the globe. They stood out horizontally in the breeze from the Mississippi and the Gulf, banners bright and triumphant as Mel's gladdened heart and, when he had sat down, looking into the far sunlit distance, Rusty sat down beside him.

"Were you going to go off and leave your old Rusty here alone?" he asked, his voice trembling oddly. His steadfast eyes on Mel's were the saddest he was ever to see.

"I've got to," Mel replied, not looking at him, as the wave of shame rolled over him, drowning him in sorrow, regret. "After last night, I can't stay. Not now." He kept shaking his head.

Rusty looked at him steadily. "What was wrong with last night, Mel?"

Mel could not look, though he felt Rusty's hot eyes on him. "You don't know. You were drunk."

Rusty caught his arm, pulled him round so that Mel had to look at him. "Like hell I was drunk! Knew everything that was going on!"

Mel caught at his breath, as Rusty laughed softly. "You knew?"

"Knew and loved it," Rusty remarked.

Mel was thoughtful then. He lifted his eyes, fixed them for a brief, glorified moment on those

of Rusty, then he looked away, to the ships that moved up the river to the wharfs. Gulls made shimmering patterns in the limpid blue of the sky, and their shadows on the planked wharfs multiplied their number.

"I'm going home," he said then, not able to control his tears. "You hate me now, I know, and this isn't a life, selling myself to men. What a life!"

Rusty still gripped his arm, his huge brown hands completely covering Mel's shoulder. "So... you're just going to run off, go back and marry up with that Catina Hadalgo? Have a passel of brats?"

"I guess."

"Listen, Mel babe. That's been over a year ago. She's had her bastard brat by now. Bet if she had as many pricks sticking out of her as she's had in her she would look like a god-damned porcupine."

Mel tried to smile at that. "What good is life here?" he managed to ask, turning then to look Rusty squarely in the eyes.

"A lot," Rusty said, clicking his teeth. "It's what you make it, good or bad. You've done it to yourself, whatever you do, whatever you are."

"But hustling. It's no damned good! We're worse off now then we were a year ago, and you know it. I need to find a job, go back home, face up to my parents, tell them how wrong I've been. If we kept on hustling we'd be half starving, in goddamned rags, like we are now."

"No, Mel, I don't mean for us to hustle," Rusty said, propping one booted foot on the bench, and squinting at the sun. "You and I got

something good going now, and I don't aim to let you go to Golden Meadow, never see you again. We can live together."

"Live on what? Love?" Mel asked solemnly, but then laughed as at an ill-timed joke, a despairing, impossible joke.

"I'll get a job. Don't laugh. I've worked in my day. I can go to work tomorrow at Jax Brewery if I had a mind to. I'm as fed up with hustling as you are."

Mel looked up with glad surprise at what he had said, but fell back in bitter disappointment. "You'd get tired of me too," he said, almost whispered. "You don't want a boy. You go for girls. Then what?"

Rusty stood up, propped one foot on the bench and leaned over Mel, his spread legs, his crotch, even with the level of Mel's eyes.

"I take to you like a goose takes to a junebug, Mel," he said with deep affection in his voice, and he nudged Mel under the chin. "And it ain't queer, not in my book."

Mel searched the intent gaze in his mellow eyes. "What is it then?"

Rusty shook his head. "I don't know, Mel. But I don't look on it like a score and a stud boy. It's more like—like husband and wife or something. I just can't put it into words."

"It's still queer."

"Alright! So it is! I don't give a good God damn!" He glanced away, thrust his hands in his back pockets. "But it can't be no worse than us out turning up our behinds to every fruity man who offers us a buck, now can it?"

"I guess not," Mel said, thinking for a mo-

ment how wonderful it would be to live with Rusty for the rest of his life, yet how seemingly improbable.

"I love you, babe," Rusty whispered, so low Mel could hardly hear him, a coarse voice, but in its masculine coarseness there was a certain vital something, the wild beauty of what he was. "I ain't never said that to nobody, Mel. Not to no girl, not to no man. And I mean it. If it's queer, it's queer."

I love you. I LOVE YOU! The thought tumbled over and over in Mel's mind, ran like a wild and beautiful fury through his heart. Then, as both pondered on that one expression, there was a long silence. Little breezes lifted and sank in the half unfurled leaves of the trees. In the top of one a mocking bird sang. It was as though it passed the whole of life through the crucible of its song and turned it to sweetness.

Both boys seemed to be waiting for some kind of verdict, so stamped decision for their lives.

"I just wish," Mel said finally. "I just wish that two men could care for one another without it looking so ridiculous!"

"To hell whether it looks ridiculous or not," summed up Rusty, who took life in stride, without conviction or moral concern. "I aim to do what I like, and I'm not going to let you run off, understand? Not ever."

Mel nodded, as if his fate automatically had been sealed.

They both watched intently as a man went up to a young kid at the corner of Loyola. They stood talking for a moment, then the kid fol-

lowed him. They got into a waiting taxi and drove off.

"Another punk losing his virginity," remarked Rusty, as he looked back at Mel. Then he laughed softly. "You know, makes me wonder about all this sucking and eating. I don't know whether you know it or not, Mel, but if you cut open a cow you can always find a huge ball of hair in her guts. It's from her licking her body and swallowing the hair off her tongue." He laughed again, this time a chuckle. "Makes me wonder if you cut open the belly of a queer would you find a ball of hair, all that sucking and licking."

"Like me? Last night?" Mel put in sadly, crimson with shame.

"Nah! Now I didn't mean that at all, Mel babe." He caught Mel's ear, pulled it lovingly. "Come on, forget Golden Meadow. I'll buy you a hamburger and a bubbling mug of suds. What you say?"

Mel got up from the bench, and they went down Loyola Avenue to Basin Street to the Garden of the Americas, around the monument of Simon Bolivar, a gift from Venezuela, and down Canal.

"Come on, Lover," Rusty said. "Let's see what's cooking in the square."

THE END

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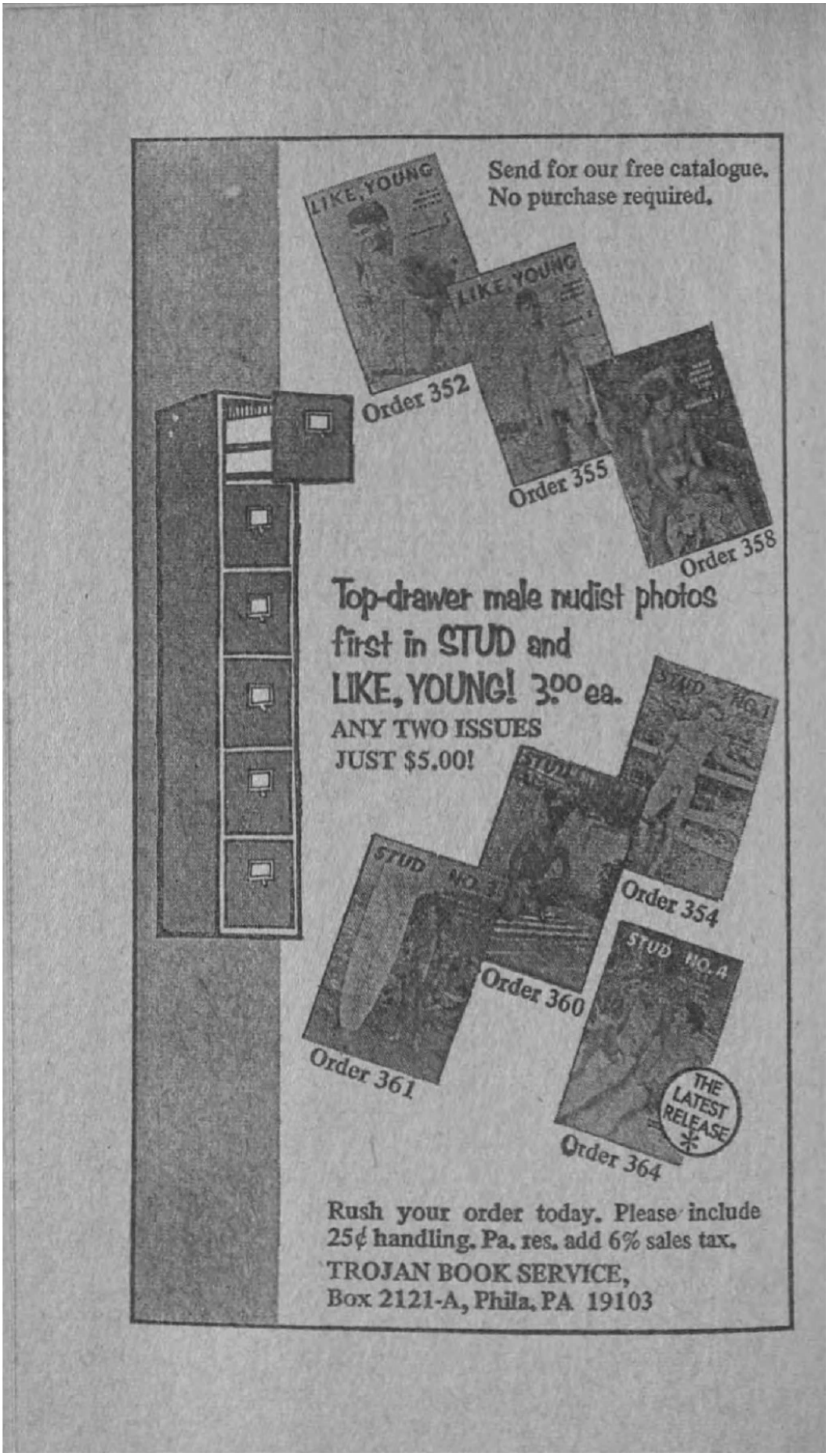
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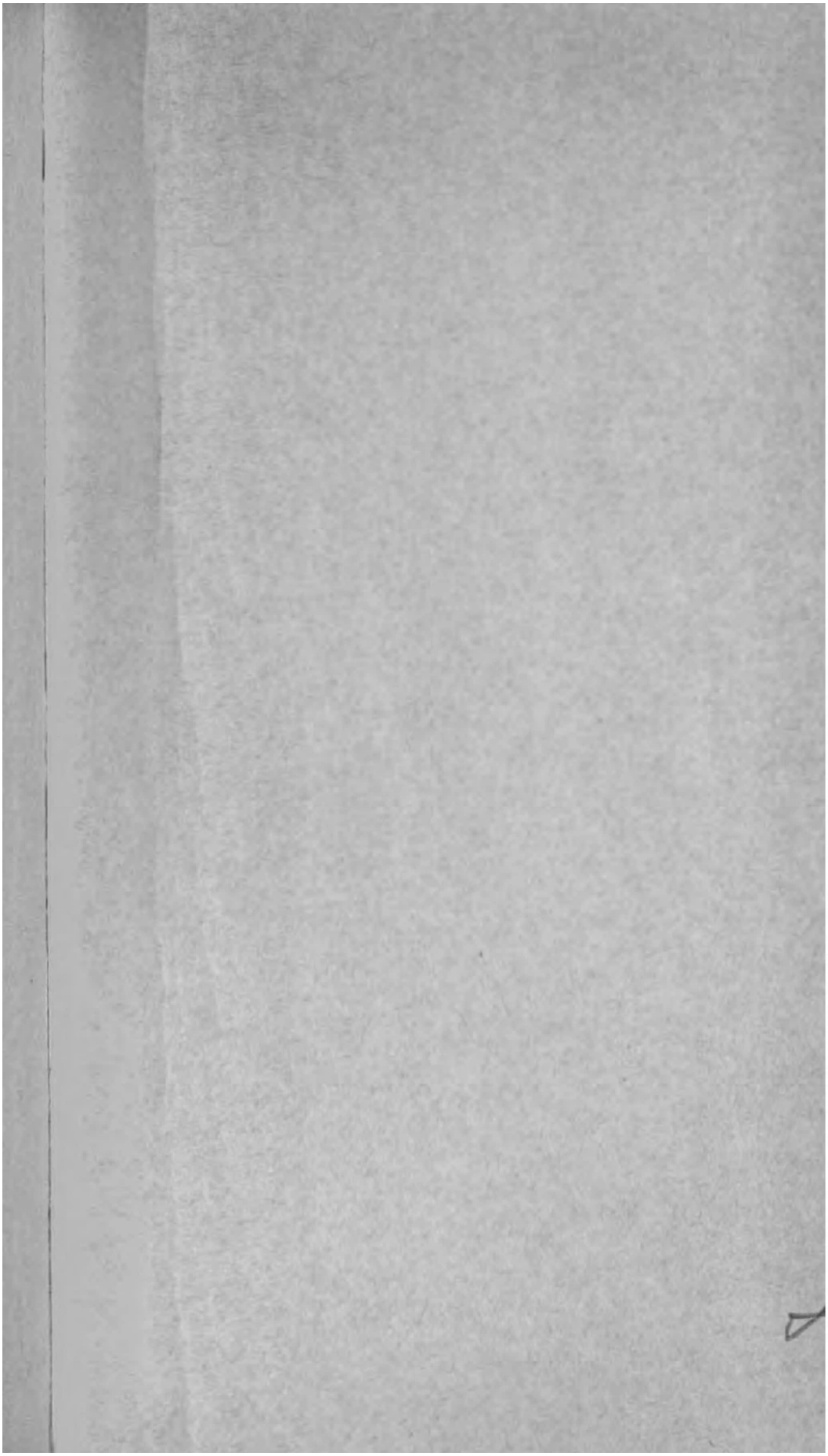

Rusty's huge hands gripped Mel's arm, almost covering his shoulder. "I love you," he whispered, "and I ain't never said that to nobody before, girl or man."